THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

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Volume 4

- END OF CHAPTER
- THE WIDOW'S CRUISE
- THE WORM OF DEATH

THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

Volume 4

After a tough day of versification, British Poet Laureate C. Day Lewis would relax by turning out literate and amusing mysteries, written as Nicholas Blake and featuring the equally literate and amusing detective Nigel Strangeways. Here are three of the 16 brilliant bafflers starring the tall, angular and urbane Nigel, who ambles through his cases with the abstract air of an Oxford don and the piercing deduction of a Sherlock Holmes.

End of Chapter. Who put the libelous passages back in General Thoresby's autobiography? It looks very much as if it was an inside job. The venerable firm of Wenham & Geraldine stands to lose a fortune in lawsuits as well as its precious reputation. And that's just to start, for the subversive editor had more than just *character* assassination in mind! "Mr. Nicholas Blake at the top of his form." —*The London Times Literary Supplement.*

The Widow's Cruise. Nigel and his companion Clare Massinger take a summer cruise to the Greek isles, where amid stately columns, turquoise waters and picturesque donkey rides, the ancient passions of jealousy and hatred rear their ugly heads. A pair of twins, a randy blackmailer and

(continued on back flap)

THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

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- *End of Chapter*
- *The Widow's Cruise*
- *The Worm of Death*

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by

Nicholas Blake

MYSTERY GUILD

Garden City, New York

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THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

Volume 4

END
OF
CHAPTER

To N.S. *and* I.M.P.
with great affection
from their unsleeping partner
in a very different kind of firm

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I *SETUP*

Nigel Strangeways turned into Adelphi, and soon arrived at the distinguished backwater of Angel Street, the Strand traffic roaring softly behind him like a weir. It would be a nice street to live in, he thought—a top-floor flat in one of these tall, elegantly uniform houses: above the hurly-burly, but not cut off from it. As middle age advances and one's youthful illusions recede, almost the only way to get the sensation of starting again, of being reborn, is to move house. But, restless though he was by nature, two moves in twelve months would be carrying one's mobility too far—one must beware of developing a tolerance for that stimulating drug.

His thoughts took Nigel the length of Angel Street, till he reached the high iron gateway which opens on a passage dividing the end of the street from Embankment Gardens The gardens looked pinched and dismal this raw late-November morning. Beyond them, on the Thames, a tug mooed dispiritedly. Glancing at his watch, Nigel decided to be five minutes early for his appointment, rather than stand about in the cold admiring the apology for nature which these gardens offered

The office of Wenham & Geraldine occupied the last house to his right, with its frontage on the street and its south side overlooking the gardens. The main door was flanked by two display windows, and there was a smaller door five or six yards up the street. Façade of dark-crimson brick, dazzling white paintwork, exquisite molding and fanlight of the doorway—they created an impression of solidity and grace, charm and decorum, altogether appropriate to the imprint of Wenham & Geraldine. How many Victorian grandees, Nigel reflected, must have carried their bulging personalities up those shallow steps to take a glass of Madeira with the now legendary James Wenham; how many of their ill-conditioned modern successors, surveying this opulent front, must snarl, "So *that's* where the profits go!" A book, the legendary James Wenham had constantly declared, is the precious life blood of a master spirit; and a vast quantity of more or less precious life blood had been siphoned off, over the last century, to swell the tide of Wenham & Geraldine's prosperity.

Moreover, though venerable, the firm was capable of moving with—or at least not more than twenty years behind—the times. One of the windows, Nigel observed, carried a display of the new book by a well-publicized

R.A.F. line shooter, together with a model airfield and a collection of toy aircraft dangling from threads above it. The display must be rather wasted on this backwater, he thought; then realized that Angel Street would be a short cut for pedestrians from the Strand to Charing Cross Underground Station, and at certain times of the day busy enough.

He found himself mounting the steps in front of a well-preserved lady, whose equine face made her choker of pearls resemble a horse collar. He opened the door of the reception room for her, and stood aside. She swept past him, with no other acknowledgment of his politeness than a puff of scent, and disappeared through a door at the far end of the room.

"My name is Strangeways," he told the receptionist. "I have an appointment with Mr. Geraldine."

After applying herself to the house telephone, the girl announced, "If you will take a seat for a moment, Mr. Geraldine's secretary will come down for you."

Nigel was getting the Number Two treatment, as later he would learn. The Number One, reserved for the equivalent of Royalty among the firm's writers, was for a partner to come downstairs in person. Lesser V.I.P.'s were fetched by a secretary; while the rabble had to find their own way. Nigel filled in time now by studying the signed photographs of authors which adorned one wall of the reception room The earlier ones ran to beards and expressions of quite unnerving self-confidence; as the eye moved on toward present times, the faces gradually lost both hair and assurance, the most recent being marked either by grinding *Angst* or by that pop-eyed, implausible bravado which looks out so often from the photograph files of Scotland Yard. To this, however, there were two noticeable exceptions: a heavily-mustached type in military uniform—the photo was signed "Richard Thoresby"—and the lady who had brushed past Nigel at the door. The large signature on her photograph informed him that she was none other than Millicent Miles—the glamorous, the unspeakable Millicent Miles, that queen of best-sellers who changed her publishers almost as often as once she had changed (so rumor said) her lovers. It was odd that Wenham & Geraldine should have taken her on. Well, here she was—full evening dress, tiara, perfectly waved hair—gazing haughtily from the wall

"Wasn't that Miss Miles who came in just before me?" asked Nigel.

"Yes. She is working here," the receptionist replied in neutral tones.

"In the firm, you mean?"

"Oh no She's writing her memoirs for us: and when she was moving house, Mr Geraldine put a room here at her disposal."

"Memoirs? That should cause a stir."

"We hope to do well with them," said the girl demurely. "Of course Miss Miles is not the type of author we often have on our list."

"I should say not! Like a university press publishing Elinor Glyn."

Nigel studied the girl. A handsome creature, in a gipsyish way; about twenty-three and tries to look older; very self-contained behind her horn-rimmed glasses; couldn't have worked here long, but was already using the publisher's "we" as to the manner born. Some quality in her speech made him ask,

"Were you at Somerville?"

"Oh dear, does it stick out like that?"

"What did you read?"

"History."

"Do all right?"

"Well, actually I got a First." The admission, accompanied by a gauche sideways jerk of the head, took several years off her apparent age.

"But you're stuck at the end of a telephone?"

"The firm likes one to start at the bottom of the ladder. If I make good with the callers, they'll promote me to secretary—and some reading, perhaps."

"The Victorian regime, eh? I see you're writing a book in between times."

Flushing, the girl thrust some manuscript pages under a blotter. "You see too much. Sorry, but I hate my work being overlooked."

"Most writers do, I believe—while it's in progress. No doubt the anthropologists could tell us something about that."

At this point another studious-looking girl appeared, Mr. Geraldine's secretary. Nigel followed her through the inner door into a passage which led, he later discovered, from the smaller street door to the packers' room. One side of this passage was heaped with bulging sacks; on the other was a lift, whose outer doors struck Nigel a vicious slap from behind as he entered.

"They always do that," said the girl brightly, as if explaining the foibles of a favorite but unreliable domestic animal

"Even to Millicent Miles?"

The girl giggled "Well, I believe she *did* ask Mr. Geraldine to have a new lift installed," she said; then gave Nigel a startled look, which plainly inquired how she could have let fall such an indiscretion before a total stranger—a question a good many people, who came across Nigel in his professional capacity, had cause to ask themselves

Reaching the second floor, Nigel was led to the senior partner's room. A

large, high, rectangular room, lit by a Venetian glass chandelier transformed for electricity and two sash windows overlooking the street: the wall facing the windows lined with books; white paneling, a luxurious fitted carpet. Nigel's arrival caught its three occupants in what might have been the *dégagé* and eternally-arrested pose of a modern conversation piece—the bald-headed man sitting at his desk flanked by the woman leaning negligently against the further window, and the saturnine red-haired chap gazing down at his shoes and jingling coins in a trouser pocket For a second or two the poses were held. Then the bald man rose and advanced smoothly upon Nigel.

"Mr. Strangeways? Exceedingly good of you to come along May I introduce you to my partners? Miss Wenham—the granddaughter of our founder. Mr. Ryle, who has recently joined us."

Arthur Geraldine had the portly figure, the bland face and address which convention associates with bishops and butlers; he had, also, a surprisingly muscular hand grip.

"You will take a glass of Madeira with us? We keep up the old —"

"Filthy stuff. Like liquid demerara sugar," Miss Wenham broke in.

"My dear Liz, you are incorrigible."

They sat at the mahogany table in the middle of the room. Arthur Geraldine poured out Madeira for the men; Liz Wenham treated herself to a glass of lemonade from the bottle on the silver tray, and bit noisily into an apple A dumpy woman of about fifty, gray-haired, with very white teeth, rosy-russet cheeks, and a mild, bright, clear eye, she would have looked more at home, Nigel felt, in tweeds, in a cottage-weaving establishment in Westmoreland. For all her fresh-air appearance, though, she soon revealed a businesslike side, cutting in on Arthur Geraldine's civilities with

"Well, hadn't we better get down to it? Joan, take Mr Geraldine's calls for the next half hour."

The secretary whisked out of the room like a leaf in a draft. Basil Ryle stopped chinking the coins in his pocket. A twinkle, whether frosty or humorous Nigel could not be sure, appeared in the senior partner's eye.

"Quite right, Liz," he said "Miss Wenham keeps us all on our toes. Now, let me put our little difficulty before you, Strangeways It is understood, of course, that this is highly confidential?"

Nigel nodded.

"You will be aware, perhaps, that this firm specializes in memoirs, biographies and the like. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Wenham & Geraldine imprint on any volume of this nature is a guarantee of the highest quality."

Mr. Geraldine's flowing periods were interrupted by a loud crash as Liz Wenham's teeth took another segment out of her apple.

"Some two years ago we entered into an agreement with General Richard Thoresby to publish his autobiography. When we received the manuscript, early this year, we discovered that parts of it were—ah—extremely controversial."

"Riddled with libel," Miss Wenham mumbled through her mouthful of apple.

"In particular, where the author criticizes the conduct of operations, during the last war, by Major General Sir Charles Blair-Chatterley. Chatterley, it seems, is his bête-noire—"

"The chap who was recently Governor-General of—?"

"The same. And Thoresby had also made the most serious allegation about Blair-Chatterley's handling of the disturbances in the colony in 1947. I will not trouble you, for the moment, with details Suffice it to say that we made representations to the author, pointing out the relevant passages, and discussing with him how they should be deleted, or at least toned down, to avoid the danger of libel. He proved somewhat intransigent—"

"A blinding nuisance," Liz Wenham put in.

"—but we finally reached, or thought we had reached, agreement with him."

"I take it you had submitted the manuscript to your legal advisers?" asked Nigel.

"Naturally."

"It sent them right up the wall," Miss Wenham remarked.

"However, when we received proofs, last July, we discovered to our alarm that the author had failed to delete from the manuscript two of the most offensive passages, which he had previously agreed to take out."

"But hadn't the manuscript been examined again before you sent it to the printers?"

"There was a slip-up there. Ryle, who was looking after the book, had gone on holiday; and in his absence, Protheroe, our chief reader, simply marked it up for the printers—it's a standard format—and handed it to our Production Manager to send off."

"We were badly behind schedule with the book, and things got rushed at that point," Liz Wenham explained. "We went straight into page proof so as to get it out for the Christmas market "

"I see. Right. It's July. You've got your page proofs and found two of the offending passages still there. What next?"

"We asked General Thoresby along," said Mr. Geraldine, "and pointed

out that we couldn't go to press unless the passages were revised or deleted. Our libel lawyer was present at the conference. It was quite a sticky one."

"The General behaved like an overgrown schoolboy," said Miss Wenham.

"He doesn't know the difference between a pen and a sword." Basil Ryle spoke for the first time—a nasal but not unpleasing voice; his eyes had been moving steadily from one speaker to another during this conversation.

"Well, the long and the short of it is that the General lost his temper and deleted the passages, rather violently, in our presence," said Geraldine.

"The word 'emasculated' was heard to fall from the warrior's lips," Basil Ryle murmured.

"Fortunately no serious repagination was involved. One of the passages only ran to a few lines, and the longer one came at the end of a chapter."

"No repagination was necessary, anyhow," said Liz Wenham brusquely. "Someone stetted the two deletions."

"Miss Wenham means," explained Arthur Geraldine, "that during the period which elapsed between our conference with Thoresby and the sending the book to press, someone marked the deleted passages with dots and the word 'stet'—in block capitals, so that the handwriting can't be identified. 'Stet' is the sign to a printer that the marked passage be retained."

"Strangeways knows all about that." Liz Wenham's voice crackled with impatience.

"Of course, of course. I was forgetting that you had put out a book or two yourself. And very charming work too, if I may say so."

Nigel felt like bearings bathed in oil, under the mellifluous tones of Mr. Geraldine. He bowed, and caught a quizzical glance from Miss Wenham.

"Where was I? Ah yes. Our representatives traveled proof copies—with the offensive passages heavily inked out, of course—and reported a most satisfactory response. We raised the first printing to fifty thousand. The book came out two days ago. Yesterday we had a communication from Sir Charles Blair-Chatterley's solicitors. They have obtained an interim injunction, and it is clear that their client will set his face against any settlement out of court. We took steps instantly to have the book withdrawn, but the damage has already been done."

"Just a minute," said Nigel. "Presumably there were advance copies. And nobody here noticed that the libelous passages had been put back? I'd have thought that some at least of the reviewers would have noticed too, and tipped you off before publication day."

"I'm afraid the responsibility is mine," began Basil Ryle, with something

less than his normal self-assurance, after a few moments' embarrassed silence.

"Nonsense, my dear boy. You mustn't reproach yourself." Mr. Geraldine turned to Nigel. "I should explain that each title we publish is given a general supervision, from start to finish, by one of the partners. Ryle was in charge of Thoresby's book, certainly But, once final proofs had been passed, there was no onus upon Ryle to scrutinize the text of the advance copy. Nor, in fact, would he have had time to do so. He looks after all our advertising and publicity work, and he's been heavily engaged with the promotion campaign for this title in particular."

Nigel was aware of a certain tension in the room during this apologia: it seemed to emanate from Liz Wenham, whose nails were beating a tattoo on the table

"What about the reviewers?" he asked.

"Owing to the delays caused by the author's, hm, attitude, we were badly behind schedule. Copies only went out a week before publication date—to postpone that date would have been inadvisable, for several reasons I can only suppose that the reviewers had not had time to—"

"Or the will to," put in Basil Ryle. "Blair-Chatterley is far from being universally loved by the military profession, and *Time to Fight* is a book that would be given to military experts for review."

"It's news to me that reviewers read books." Miss Wenham sounded impatient "Anyway, the point is that we're in the doghouse."

"You're insured against libel, I presume?"

"There are no insurance policies against loss of prestige," replied the senior partner in oracular tones. "Technically, as you know, publisher, printer and author are held equally responsible in an action for libel. Even supposing our insurance policy will cover our share of the damages—and they're likely to be enormous in the present case—there's our reputation to consider. After such a flagrant libel, authors and agents might well fight shy of sending us their books. our whole reputation for—" Arthur Geraldine's pink cheeks quivered, his voice shook "Why? I simply can't understand it. We've always been a happy family here. Why should anyone want to do such a thing?"

It was a rhetorical question; but Nigel had little tolerance for rhetorical questions; he proceeded to answer it, dogmatically.

"There are four possible motives. To damage your firm. To do down the author. To disoblige this Blair-Chatterley. Or, of course, pure mischief. I take it you want me to find out—"

Arthur Geraldine held up his hand there was more hair on its back than

on his head. "Precisely. We are not vindictive But we must prevent any recurrence of the trouble. Finding the person responsible won't help us in court, but we should at least feel secure against—"

"Suspect anyone?"

Automatically, the three partners' eyes sought one another in a silent consultation. Nigel could read their minds they were debating the ethics of voicing suspicions for which they had inadequate grounds, or which they were ashamed of feeling. After a short pause, Mr. Geraldine spoke·

"We have discussed it amongst ourselves, naturally. But we are quite at a loss. During the crucial periods, the proof copy of *Time to Fight* was in Protheroe's room, accessible to—"

"I'd rather go into the mechanics of it later, if you don't mind. There was no one with a grudge against the firm?"

A slightly embarrassed silence, broken by Basil Ryle: "I still think Bates should be questioned."

"We've had all that out, Basil." Miss Wenham was visibly bristling

"Bates is—was our Production Manager," Arthur Geraldine explained. "He was certainly under notice at the time. But he'd been with us, let me see, thirty-two years, and always devoted to the firm's interests. I am confident he is above suspicion."

"But you sacked him."

Mr. Geraldine winced at the crude expression "He was getting on in years, you know, and his methods had become just a leetle—ah hum—over-conservative, shall we say? So we asked him if he was prepared to retire, somewhat before the fixed date, on full pension of course."

This Agag-like treatment of the subject only heightened the tension round the table. Nigel interpreted it—correctly, as it proved—to mean that the up-and-coming young Ryle had fallen foul of Bates or his methods, and forced his resignation, against the opposition of Liz Wenham certainly and perhaps of the senior partner.

"And was he?"

"Was he—?"

"Was your Mr Bates 'prepared to retire'? Did he go, or was he pushed?"

Nigel caught an approving gleam in Miss Wenham's eye, as she said, "He certainly did *not* want to go But he wouldn't do a thing like that It's out of the question."

Basil Ryle, sighing, shrugged his shoulders. "I think, if Mr. Strangeways agrees to help us, he must be allowed to have an open mind about everyone in the firm—including us round the table here"

"Ah, come now, Basil." A trace of Irish was heard, for the first time, in Arthur Geraldine's speech.

"Basil is right. We owe it to our employees." As so often when Liz Wenham spoke, it had the effect of a window opened to let in some bracing air. The uneasiness in the room was dispelled.

"What about your reader?" Nigel asked. "By the way, is he the Stephen Protheroe who wrote *Fire and Ash?*"

"Yes. A remarkable poem, wasn't it?" said Miss Wenham.

"We have sold some twenty-six thousand copies of it," remarked Mr. Geraldine, "since 1927, and there is still a modest demand. Extraordinary, you know, that he never followed it up"

"I should think that poem would be enough to burn anyone out. And is he to be above suspicion too?"

"Stephen has been with us since 1930. He has no financial interest in the firm, though we did sound him about partnership a few years ago."

"He seems to have had the best opportunity to tamper with the proof copy," said Nigel.

"Possibly" Arthur Geraldine's very long, thin upper lip seemed to stretch yet further, giving him a sharklike look. "But if he did it, I'd never trust my own judgment again."

They discussed ways and means for a while. It was decided that Nigel should pursue his investigations, under cover of being temporarily engaged as a specialist reader. None of them supposed that this cover would hold up for more than a day or two, but even so short a period might help. His fee was stated, and agreed to. Then Miss Wenham said,

"Where's he going to work?"

"Better put him in the room next to Stephen's," said Arthur Geraldine.

"Miss Miles won't welcome that," said Basil Ryle.

"Oh damn, I'd forgotten she was still with us. How much longer do we have to entertain the woman?"

Ryle shrugged. It was evident to Nigel that the best-selling authoress was Ryle's protégée, acceptable to the other two, if at all, for the money Wenham & Geraldine would make out of her.

"How long has she been using the room?" he mildly inquired.

"Since we signed her up, last June, off and on. She was moving house then."

"And now she seems to have moved in permanently on us," muttered Liz Wenham.

Geraldine said, "Well, as long as it's a golden egg, I suppose we can put up with her laying it on the premises. Mr. Strangeways had better go in

with Stephen, then." Moving over to his desk, he dialed a number on the internal telephone.

"Stephen, could you spare us a few minutes?"

The receiver buzzed at him like a wasp.

". . . Well, it is rather important Thanks." He put down the telephone. "Stephen's in a mood."

Nigel looked forward with some interest to meeting the author of that acrid, tragic poem, *Fire and Ash,* in a mood or out of it. Stephen Protheroe, once upon a time "a name to be conjured with," "a young singer to be watched," etc., etc., had given the public no further opportunity to watch him or to conjure with him. Withdrawing again into the total obscurity from which *Fire and Ash,* his one published work, had emerged, he had been lost to view for over twenty-five years. Few of the many admirers of that book could have stated with any certainty whether he was still alive, or dead.

"We're all very fond of Stephen," said Liz Wenham. "And terrified of him."

II *FIRST IMPRESSION*

A little grig of a man darted into the room, with a movement that suggested fins rather than legs. The fishlike effect was accentuated by his thin mouth, which was opening and shutting silently. After a few seconds, the mouth achieved speech.

"How much longer is that bloody woman going to infest the building? She's wasted half an hour of my time this morning already—pestering me about her punctuation. Punctuation! I ask you! Am I hired to put in stops for female morons? And I don't like her scent either."

Protheroe's diatribe was itself most effectively punctuated—with loud sniffs. Nigel took in the high-bridged nose, the noble forehead, the fine eyes blazing through horn-rimmed spectacles, which surmounted so oddly a weak mouth and an almost nonexistent chin. The man's voice was equally paradoxical—deep and resonant, but occasionally cracking to a furious squawk. One's eyes kept returning to his mouth, which had the habit of nibbling silently at words, before pronouncing them aloud.

"I have worked in this firm now for a quarter of a century," Protheroe was proclaiming, "and I should have thought I had earned the right to a little (sniff) privacy. Of course, if you prefer me to spend my time spoon-feeding illiterate (sniff) ex-trollops rather than reading manuscripts, I'll accommodate myself to your (sniff) new policy. Who's this?"

Stephen Protheroe had at last become aware of Nigel's presence, and whipped off his spectacles with the apparent object of seeing him better.

"Our new reader. Mr. Strangeways—Mr. Protheroe."

"Hm'ff. Sorely needed. How do you do? You can take Miss Millicent Miles off my hands. I like the 'Miss.' A Miss is as good as a Miles, I told her just now. She always—she hates puns. So do I, but it's the only way I can get her out of the room." He turned upon Liz Wenham. "New *reader*, did you say? We don't want a new reader."

"Now sit down, Stephen, have a glass of Madeira, and calm yourself."

Protheroe peered at the proffered glass suspiciously, took a gulp, smacked his lips.

"The Madeira vine," he informed the company, "was introduced to the island by the Portuguese, from Cyprus, or possibly Crete, early in the fifteenth century. It is a cousin of the wine known to schoolboys as Malmsey,

and to antiquarian pedants as Malvoisie Under either name it no doubt tasted equally sickly."

"Stephen, could you stop talking for a minute and listen," implored Liz Wenham. The note of exasperated affection in her voice was not lost upon Nigel.

"Strangeways has very kindly consented to investigate our little trouble over *Time to Fight*. You remember, Stephen, he was recommended to us yesterday by—"

"Nobody here ever tells me anything."

"You just don't listen—that's your trouble," said Liz Wenham.

"I shall observe your methods with interest." Protheroe gave Nigel a courtly bow. "The science, or perhaps one should say the art, of detection has long been to me—"

"Perhaps we should let Strangeways proceed with his art, or science?" Basil Ryle interposed.

" 'In my craft or sullen art,' " chanted Protheroe "A shade dubious, do you think? That 'sullen'—did it come from the heart or the head?"

"For God's *sake*, Stephen!" exclaimed Arthur Geraldine. "This is a publishing house, not a Senior Common Room. You don't seem to realize the gravity of this libel action."

"Protheroe has nothing at stake," snapped Ryle.

Liz Wenham bristled. "I think we all know how much spiritual capital Stephen has put into the firm."

"Now, children! No quarreling!" Protheroe turned to Nigel. "At your service."

"I'd like to study the proof copy that was tampered with, and the original typescript. I want the addresses of General Thoresby, Blair-Chatterley and Mr. Bates, and a list of your present employees, with the length of time each has been in the firm, and a specimen of his or her handwriting. In the meantime, perhaps I could have a talk with Protheroe"

Arthur Geraldine nodded He went to a corner of the room, opened a safe which was discreetly concealed behind a large screen—as though nothing to be associated with base lucre should meet the eye in this high-toned room—and returned to the table with a proof copy and a typescript bound in brown paper.

"Er, you will be at pains, I am sure, my dear fellow, not to—" The senior partner, looking oddly pathetic, broke off and tried again. "I do realize, of course, that you will have to ask a great number of questions. But we do not want the staff, er, well, you know, unduly—I mean, unnecessarily—upset."

"I am sure Mr. Strangeways is the soul of tact," said Liz Wenham soothingly.

With that, Nigel took his leave, escorted by Stephen Protheroe. Stephen pointed out the rooms of the other two partners, off the same passage as Geraldine's Then they mounted a flight of stairs, emerged onto a landing with the lift doors to their left and a notice, WENHAM & GERALDINE. EDITORIAL DEPT., on the wall in front of them, and stopped at a door three yards down the passage. To this door was fastened a card, bearing in large block capitals the legend MR. BLODWORTH—KEEP OUT.

"Here we are," said Stephen. "Mr. Blodworth passed over many years ago, but we like to keep in touch with our past. And of course it does baffle a certain number of my unwelcome visitors—though not, I fear, for long." He gazed at the card meditatively; then, whipping out a thick pencil, wrote underneath KEEP OUT the words THIS INCLUDES YOU, MISS MILES. "Welcome to my hutch," he said, throwing open the door.

It was certainly very different from the great open spaces of the senior partner's room.

"Very cozy, I am sure," said Nigel, eying with misgivings the cluttered desk, the naked bulb overhead, the shelves of dusty books, the two hard chairs which comprised the furniture and fittings of this glorified packing case One side of it was partitioned off from the room next door by a thin wall with a sliding, frosted-glass window in it. Through the wall could be heard the excitable chatter of a typewriter.

"She actually *composes* her sickening works on a *machine,*" said Protheroe, with an expression of deep disgust. "That shows you, doesn't it?"

"And where do I sit?"

"Oh, I expect we can squeeze a little table into that corner. If we do, it will be physically impossible for our neighbor to get into the room at all. Then it only remains to seal up the sliding window and we shall be inviolable."

"Yes, that's very nice But how about getting *out* of the room? We shall need to do that from time to time."

"Oh dear me, are you one of those *active* detectives? I was hoping you would be the Nero Wolfe type, never budging from your chair."

Clearing a space on the desk, Stephen put down the proof copy and typescript of *Time to Fight;* but Nigel showed no eagerness to examine them yet. Instead, he flicked a forefinger at them and asked, "Well, what can you tell me about all this?"

"Tell you? How do you mean?" Protheroe seemed a little disconcerted

"Go back to last July The day this proof came back from the author. What date was it, by the way?"

"The 22nd."

"Did it come by post, or did the author bring it in?"

"Post. Does that matter?"

"Probably not. What happened next? What's the exact procedure in this house?"

While the typewriter clacked feverishly next door, Nigel extracted from Stephen Protheroe the following information. The proof had arrived by midday post on the 22nd. The parcel was brought to Basil Ryle's room. After lunch he began scrutinizing it, to make sure that the author had settled all the printer's queries, and the author's corrections made sense. A publicity meeting that afternoon prevented Ryle from finishing work on the proof, so he took it home with him. Reading it after dinner, he discovered that the offending passages had not been taken out. Next morning he discussed with Geraldine and Protheroe whether they should be quietly deleted in the office and the book sent to press, or whether General Thoresby should be consulted. Though the General had previously agreed to their deletion, Geraldine decided that the firm had better have a showdown with him, and get the record absolutely straight. So a meeting was arranged for 2 P.M. the same afternoon, between the partners, their legal adviser, and the author. This, as Nigel had already been told, was a lively encounter; but the General had finally been induced to see reason, and the libelous passages were marked out there and then. The meeting broke up a little before 3 P M Ryle at once brought up the proof copy to Stephen Protheroe, asking him to examine it for any errors which might have gone unnoticed by printer's reader and author.

"Is that part of your job normally?" asked Nigel.

"Oh, I'm just the little old dogsbody who sits up aloft Ryle would have done it, but he was immersed in one of his publicity campaigns He's a (sniff) live wire, you know. High-voltage fellow."

"So now we come to the zero hour. About 3 P M on July 23rd. You're correcting the proof. How long did it take?"

"I'd got most of it done by 6:30—I'm pretty fast, you know, and a Deadeye Dick for misprints I finished it off next morning, by about 11, and gave it to Bates to post."

"What part of the book do the libelous passages come in?"

"Chapter III and at the end of Chapter XIII."

"And had you got past Chapter XIII before you left that evening?"

"Yes I'd done fourteen out of the seventeen chapters."

"So the proof must have been tampered with *after* you left, or the next morning? Otherwise you'd have noticed the stet marks while you were reading it through that afternoon?"

"I certainly would."

"You're sure of that?"

"Positive."

"Well, let's take the evening first. Have you any idea who was in the building after you left?"

The partners had discussed this with him yesterday, Stephen said. It was impossible to be certain even of their own movements on a night over four months ago. But, as far as they could remember, Geraldine had gone up to his flat on the top floor shortly after 6:30, Liz Wenham had left the office about 6:15, Basil Ryle had worked till 7 and then departed As for the staff, some of them normally finished work at 5, the rest at 5:30, the only exceptions being the partners' secretaries, who on occasion did overtime. The records showed that, on the night of the 23rd, none of these secretaries was kept late.

Further questions produced for Nigel the information that the main door was locked and bolted at 5·30; anyone leaving after 5.30 would go out by the side door. The receptionist remained at her post till 5:30, and had already told the partners that General Thoresby had not returned to the building after his departure.

"What about this side door? Who has keys to it?"

"The partners. Myself. And there's a spare in the receptionist's desk. I believe Millicent Miles has borrowed it once or twice when she wanted to come back and work late."

"So, after 7 that evening, there was no one in the building, officially, except Mr. Geraldine?"

"And his wife. As far as we can tell."

"What about Miss Miles? Was she here that day?"

"I simply can't remember It was so long ago"

Nigel threw his head back and gazed down his nose at Stephen Protheroe.

"Perhaps it strikes you as odd that I want to know about the movements of the people who should be most above suspicion But who else—except the partners, the author and yourself—would have known, at the time, about the libelous passages?"

Stephen gave a snuffling laugh. "My dear chap, you've no idea the gossip that goes on—"

"But how could it *start?* From whom?"

"Jane, for example. Arthur's secretary. She was taking notes at the meeting with Thoresby that afternoon."

"Yes, I've noticed she is not perfectly discreet."

"You've got to realize that in a publishing house—odd as it may seem—a lot of people are genuinely interested in books; anyone attached to the partners or the editorial staff almost certainly is. I bet you the news about the General's trying to put one over us was all round the building in a few hours."

"I'll believe you. Next morning, then. You arrive at—?"

"Nine-thirty."

"The page proofs were where you had left them."

"Not exactly. But the cleaners always shift everything on my desk."

"You didn't casually turn back to the deleted passages?"

"No. I went straight on correcting from where I had left off."

"Were you in this room the whole time from 9.30 till 11 when you took the proof copy to Mr. Bates?"

"I've been trying to remember, ever since this thing blew up. I was certainly in the loo for five minutes, being a man of regular habits—probably at about 9:45. And of course one pops out now and then to have a chat with somebody. It's really impossible to be accurate at such a distance of time."

"So, theoretically, there were opportunities for the proof to be tampered with any time between 6:30 P.M. on the 23rd and 11 A.M. on the 24th: after that, only Bates himself or some Black Hand at the printer's could have done it.

"You can dismiss Bates from your mind at once. He's an atrocious old bore, but he'd never do anything to injure the firm. But all this is assuming that I've been telling you the truth," added Stephen with an impish look.

"We'll work on that assumption," Nigel answered "For the present."

"The trouble is, I had so much *more* opportunity than anyone else."

"What would be your motive, then?"

"Ah, there you have me. I really can't imagine."

Nigel's pale blue eyes were alive with interest—an infectious though impersonal interest, which had drawn confidences, almost hypnotically, from many people whose interests had by no means been served by making them. He leaned back and said, "Well, who do *you* think did it?"

Stephen's thin lips, turned down at the corners, nibbled for words. What he would have replied Nigel was not to know; for the sliding window behind Stephen's back opened, and a voice said, "How do you spell 'holocaust'?"

"It's a word I never use," Stephen sourly answered, over his shoulder.

"Haven't you got a dictionary there?" Millicent Miles' head protruded through the window, like a horse's looking over the top of a loose box. "Oh, you've a visitor."

"Yes."

"Won't you introduce me?" asked Nigel, rising to his feet.

"Mr. Strangeways—Miss Miles." Stephen added grumpily, "He's come to do some reading for the firm."

Millicent Miles extended a jeweled hand through the window. "I'm so glad. I hope you'll be on my side. You must talk Mr. Protheroe round: he's so obstinate."

Nigel had no idea what she was talking about. Pinched Knightsbridge accent; black woolen dress, a little dandruff on the shoulders, the pearl choker; large mouth and prominent teeth; green, rather insolent eyes, with that wandering look to be found in the eyes of authors and snob hostesses. So much, Nigel took in at once Conversation through the sliding window was difficult: one had to stoop sideways, as if talking to a booking clerk

"How's the book getting on, Miss Miles?" he asked.

Her eyes rolled up and round—a trick of hers he was to learn, and oddly gauche in a woman so self-possessed; it must be a throwback, he thought, to the days when she was young, shy, intense, awkward

"It's a dreadful struggle," she said

"I thought your births were always painless," remarked Stephen Protheroe.

Miss Miles laughed, showing her large teeth "That's a common masculine delusion, isn't it, Mr. Strangeways?"

"Not in this case," said Stephen. "Your typewriter has never paused for breath this morning. You write in a condition of self-hypnosis, you know."

"I do *write,* anyway," she retorted, smiling too sweetly at Stephen's averted face.

These exchanges puzzled Nigel. They sounded like the wrangling of an old married couple, the weapons' edges blunted by long use. Protheroe, of course, was an eccentric, a law unto himself one did not expect from him the normal amenities and evasions of social intercourse

"I suppose you've known each other a long time?" he asked.

The other two spoke almost together.

"It seems a very long time."

"We've been neighbors since June, when I began using this room I've got quite used to Mr Protheroe's idiosyncrasies. His bark is worse than his bite."

Nigel smiled. "For me, as Christopher Fry would say, the Bark is Bite Enough."

Miss Miles gave her loud, rattling laugh. "I must remember that."

"She'll put it into her book," muttered Stephen, "with or without acknowledgments."

"Come and talk to me, won't you, Mr Strangeways. I've done my morning's stint. And I really can't converse doubled-up like this"

Nigel raised his eyebrows at Stephen, who seemed sunk in a pit of disgust; then, picking up the proof of *Time to Fight*, he went out into the passage The door of Miss Miles' room, he noticed, had a new lock. The room was larger than Stephen's, but sparsely furnished. A table and office chair stood on a rug in the middle, the chair's back to the door. An armchair, an electric fire, a vase of flowers on the window sill, and a typewriter: little else. A neat pile of typescript was laid beside the machine. Pinned to a wall, a piece of squared paper caught Nigel's eye

"That's my work graph," said Miss Miles. "Every day I extend the line to show how many words I have written. It keeps me up to the mark."

"Very businesslike of you."

"Well, writing is a business. I've no patience with the high-brow attitude. I have a certain commodity at my disposal. I wish to sell it in the best market I've got to keep up my output." She rolled her eyes. "Are you very shocked?"

Nigel made a polite, deprecatory sound.

"How long have you been in this trade? I don't seem to remember—"

"I do a bit of specialized reading from time to time."

"I think specialization is the curse of our age." Miss Miles delivered the truism with all the animation of one who has planted the flag on virgin soil. "Hallo," she went on. "You've got Thor's book."

"You know him well?"

"I know too many people. It's the bane of a successful writer's life—one simply can't get away from one's public. Lectures, cocktail parties, fan mail, press interviews—sometimes I wish I'd never set pen to paper." Miss Miles sighed, rather theatrically.

"But you enjoy it? And it's all grist to the autobiography."

The popular authoress gave him a little-girl look. "Do you agree with me that one's autobiography should be absolutely, fearlessly frank?"

"Well, about oneself perhaps. But if you start lacing into other people—" Nigel held up the proof copy.

"Oh yes I believe there's been some trouble about Thor's—"

"You know damned well there has," came a barbed voice from the next room. "And exactly what trouble too."

Millicent Miles rose from her armchair and shut the sliding window.

"Odious little man," she muttered. "But he's a genius in his own line. One must make allowances."

In talking with an egotist it is never difficult to steer the conversation into a given channel without his perceiving it· the difficulty is to keep it there. Millicent Miles' egotism, Nigel judged, had much in common with a child's; and no doubt it was the permanently non-adult part of her mind which had made her so prolific and successful a writer of romances. At any rate, she showed no reluctance to talk about the libel imbroglio, and no suspicion that Nigel was anything but a personable stranger who enjoyed conversing with Millicent Miles. Nigel was careful, of course, to keep her at the center of the picture A novelist such as she, he disingenuously put forward, had special powers of observation and character judgment. Were he one of the partners, it was she to whom he would come first for advice, particularly as she'd been working next door to the room where the proof copy had been tampered with. Naturally, she must have been concentrating upon her own work at the time; but often the subconscious, particularly of so sensitive a person as Miss Miles, took in things its owner was unaware of till later. But perhaps she had not been in the office at all on July 23rd and 24th?

The question was quickly settled by a glance at the wall chart. The graph line was solid for the days she had worked in the office, dotted for those when she had been absent: the line for July 23–24 was solid But, as to any furtive comings-and-goings in the next room on those dates, her mind was a blank. People were constantly popping in and out of one another's rooms here, she complained; that was why she had asked Mr. Geraldine to have a lock put on her door.

Since Millicent Miles' interest in the affair of the proof copy was confined to her own presence near the scene of the crime, Nigel could pursue the subject no further—not, at any rate, in his role of temporary reader He tried another opening

"When you came into Protheroe's room just now, you said something about hoping I'd be on your side."

"Yes, that's what I wanted to talk to you about, privately " She lowered her voice, glancing at the partition between her room and Protheroe's "When Mr. Ryle asked me to give this firm my autobiography, there was an understanding that Wenham & Geraldine should also reprint some of my novels—the earlier ones which have been out of print for some time I am

convinced—" Her green eyes took on a faraway look, as though she were reverently contemplating some spiritual revelation—"I am convinced that they have a message for the younger generation today. Which makes Stephen Protheroe's opposition all the more disgraceful."

"You say there was 'an understanding' between you and Mr. Ryle. But you've no clause in your contract—?"

"It was a gentleman's agreement. One expects such understandings to be honored by any reputable firm."

"But surely Protheroe hasn't all that much influence here?"

"Oh, he's their little tin god"—a certain coarseness of intonation began to show through her Knightsbridge accent—"and Miss Wenham for some reason has taken against me. Ridiculous frump! Between the two of them, they can put such pressure on Arthur Geraldine—he always was a weak man—"

Nigel let her rattle on, repeating her grievance with every variation known to female ingenuity. Preserving (he hoped) the respectful but noncommittal expression of a new employee of the firm, who must neither be disloyal to its policy nor discouraging to one of its lucrative authors, Nigel, under cover of the typewriter, idly riffled through the pages of *Time to Fight* till he found the chapter ending which had caused the trouble. He saw a stet mark against the last paragraph. Then a word in it rose up at him —the word "holocaust."

When Millicent Miles had talked herself to a temporary standstill, Nigel rose to go, assuring her that he would do everything within his very limited power, etc. etc. As he went, his hand brushed against the pile of typescript lying face down on the table, and dislodged some of the top sheets. Apologizing profusely, he picked them up from the floor and replaced them—but not before his eye had swiftly taken in the last sentences Miss Miles had type before opening the window into Protheroe's room. The word "holocaust" did not appear in them; nor, even allowing for the wild vagaries of her style, did they offer any conceivable context for such a word.

III *STET*

Half an hour later, Nigel Strangeways was eating sandwiches and drinking Scotch ale in a pub off the Strand. The place was patronized chiefly, it seemed, by the lower ranks of business and the civil service, the latter distinguished by large, black Homburg hats crammed down over their ears and a self-important manner of speech, the former by a drab and synthetic bonhomie which might have been learned from a chapter on the man-to-man approach in some manual for commercial travelers. The two types were identical, however, in one respect—that hideous and slovenly accent which is the marriage of dying Cockney with a degraded culture. No wonder, thought Nigel, people devour the impossible romances of Millicent Miles: reality is altogether too sordid. But reality, if one looked round at a place like this, was also quite unreal. These clerical officers, these good fellows (our representative, Mr. Smith, will call upon you . . .), herding together for protection against their own individual nonentity, uneasily cocky in their own century of the Common Man—what had they to support them but a kind of abstract and meaningless status? "Unreal City," he murmured: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many."

Not that a publisher's office gave any strong conviction of reality, either. How could it, living on such an unsolid commodity as words? Upon authors, those furtive and self-centered ghosts forever spinning words to conceal their shame, their impotence, their inescapable shadowiness? Miss Miles, who wrote far too much; Stephen Protheroe, who had apparently dried up; General Thoresby—no, the General was different, a man who used words, as he would use artillery, to destroy the enemy.

"Do you believe in coincidence?" Nigel suddenly asked a total stranger—one of the black-hatted brigade—who had sat down at his little table and was unspeakably pouring ketchup over a plateful of cold salmon

"Pardon?" The individual eyed Nigel with suspicion and resentment.

"I said, do you believe in coincidence?"

"Worl, yew've got to be a bit cautious nahdays whatchew credit. *And* who yew talk to," he added truculently.

"Throw caution to the winds. It's the bane of you civil servants. Forget

your files for once, and study a live human face Do I look like a confidence man or a Teddy boy?"

"Worl—"

"You are perfectly correct. I can see you are an acute judge of character. Now then, do you believe in coincidence?"

"Funny thing you should mention it," replied the stranger, humoring him. "Only this morning the worf says—"

"Never mind what your wife said. I'm asking you—"

"Aw downt quart lawk yewer tone."

"In an age swamped by mechanistic physics and mechanistic psychology, the only rock left above the surface is coincidence—beautiful, anarchistic coincidence. In a society that bows down and worships at the altar of statistics, coincidence is the one remaining manifestation of a higher Providence."

"Aw'm a free thinker mawself."

"You will say, perhaps, that the science, art or sullen craft of criminal detection should confine itself to facts which admit of a causal explanation. I disagree A science which leaves no room for coincidence—that is to say, for two apparently related events to happen simultaneously without there being any actual connection between them whatsoever—is an inadequate science, a false science. Must you go?"

The stranger mumbled that he had seen a friend come in, and removed his plate, his beer and his person, the latter visibly sweating.

Having got the table to himself again, Nigel resumed his train of thought. For all his recent defense of an arbitrary and overriding law manifesting itself in coincidence, he found it difficult to swallow the particular example he had been offered this morning. He turned once again to the offending passage in General Thoresby's book. There it was, crossed out, a delete mark at the side, this mark crossed out in its turn, dots under the lines and a stet sign clearly written in the margin. It was not a very long paragraph, but it was dynamite.

> To sum up, the Governor's handling of the disturbances from start to finish (if "handling" is a word appropriate to one who never lifted a finger till it was too late) gave an object lesson in nerveless ineptitude, and constitutes a major blot upon the already checkered annals of our Colonial Administration Firm action at the start would have rendered the disaffected elements powerless Firm action, even after the rising had gathered force, would have quelled it with a minimum of bloodshed But the Governor, occupied with the more congenial business of cocktail parties, opening bazaars and enjoying his siestas, took no action whatsoever except to obstruct the military in their efforts

> to disperse the mobs. As a result of his criminal negligence there was considerable loss of life and widespread destruction of property. The holocaust at the Ulombo barracks, where a half company of the Sussex Fusiliers perished to a man, is but one of the needless disasters for which a supine and incompetent administrator must be held directly responsible.

Whether or no they were fair criticism, Nigel's heart warmed to the author of these cannonading periods. The chapter which they concluded began with an account of General Thoresby's period of service as O.C. the troops in the colony. He had clearly been at loggerheads with the Governor-General over the steps which should be taken in view of its unsettled condition, and had been recalled to England just before the disturbances actually broke out.

. . . And Millicent Miles, before she had realized that Stephen Protheroe was not alone in his room, had asked him how to spell "holocaust." . . .

What Nigel had so far read of *Time to Fight* compelled respect both for the General's professional abilities and his literary style. When he used the word "holocaust," he would use it in its correct modern meaning of "complete destruction by fire"—perhaps, considering his indignation against Blair-Chatterley, in its original meaning of "a *sacrifice* wholly consumed by fire."

General Thoresby's book showed him a brilliant soldier fanatical over his own conceptions of strategy, tactics and logistics. Nigel turned back to the first of the two libelous passages Here, describing a certain push in France in 1944, the General had written,

> The offensive was entirely successful, except on the Paume-Luzières sector Here, during a mercifully brief period of command, General Blair-Chatterley's Crimean and costive conduct of operations achieved 2,586 casualties among his own troops and a noticeable heightening of the enemy's morale

All but the first sentence of this passage had been deleted, then stetted. Though one might fault it for excessive alliteration, its panache made Nigel all the more eager to meet its author An appointment at the General's club had been fixed by telephone, and thither Nigel now betook himself.

A waiter showed Nigel to the library, where General Thoresby was sitting alone, deep in a volume of Proust.

"Ah, Strangeways? You drink, I hope? Two Armagnacs—large ones "

A small, erect, dapper man shook hands with Nigel. The General's face presented an odd combination of the don and the pirate: gray hair, a high forehead, dreamy blue eyes; but beneath them the swashbuckling mustache,

full red lips, a ram of a jaw. His voice was gentle, but turned staccato at moments of excitement.

Nigel complimented him, with sincerity, on what he had read of his book.

"Surprised to find a soldier literate?" The General chuckled.

"I'm surprised to find anyone literate nowadays."

"Geraldine tells me you're looking for the culprit. Don't know if I encourage that. Good luck to the fellow, I'd say."

"But you didn't creep back into the office and do the dirty work yourself, sir?"

Thoresby chuckled again "I'd have done it if I could, but they'd have spotted me. Of course, I might have bribed one of Geraldine's minions to do it for me. Had you thought of that?" The blue eyes gave Nigel a schoolboy's mock-innocent stare.

"As a matter of fact, I had."

"But I didn't. Word of honor. Ah, here are the drinks."

General Thoresby lifted his glass to Nigel. "Good health. I won't say good hunting. I see you're trying to sum me up Don't be misled by my mustache. Grew it to impress the troops, and can't be bothered to remove it now. Camouflage Goes well with a bowler hat, too."

Nigel took the reference. "You were retired after your row with the Governor-General?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind if I ask you a very straight question, sir?"

"Ask away and I'll see."

"Your attacks on General Blair-Chatterley in this book—were they, well, you know, pro-bono-publico criticisms, or have you some personal feeling against him?"

"A bit of both. He needs showing up. Also, one of the two young officers burnt alive with their men in the Ulombo barracks was a protégé of mine."

There was a pause. The General frowned fiercely at the volume of Proust on the table beside him.

"I see," said Nigel presently "That makes things more awkward still."

"How do you mean?"

"In the libel suit The plaintiff will be able to allege a personal grudge on your part. Difficult for you to plead fair comment"

"The plaintiff might find that allegation cutting both ways," said the General mildly

"He had a grudge against you? Before the appearance of the book?"

"My report on the political unrest in the colony, and the military disposi-

tions that should have been made to counter it—not at all gratifying to old B C."

"But he was—"

"Oh yes, he was whitewashed, after the damage had been done. A deal of influence in high quarters, has B.C" General Thoresby's voice became staccato. "A nice lot of whitewash. A nice bit of hushing-up Reasons of high policy. Politicians make me vomit."

"I *see.*"

"What do you see, my boy?" The blue eyes were piercing now, and alight with intelligence.

"You *want* this libel case to go forward You want Blair-Chatterley's bungling brought out in the open—all the whitewash scraped off—and a libel action is the only way it can be done. Even though it could ruin you financially. I call it rather public spirited."

"I can assure you one of one thing. I'd have done just the same if that young friend of mine had not been killed out there."

"Yes. I'm not trying to be censorious; but Wenham & Geraldine, and the printers—they never asked to be dragged into this battle of yours."

The reckless, piratical aspect of General Thoresby now came uppermost. "They can take their chance. Publishers insure against libel, don't they? And they've got some sort of defense—they did their best to have these bits cut out of the book."

"That's no defense. They want to settle out of court, you know."

"Old B.C. won't consent," replied the General with glee. "He daren't. The thing's spread around too far already He's got to come and play in the mud. Have some more brandy."

"No thanks. And your defense—?"

"I've had it out with my needle nose. He's instructed to plead that I told the truth in those passages, and told it for the public benefit."

"Well, it's your funeral. You can support your statements?"

"My dear chap, I've been occupying much of my enforced leisure during the last few years in accumulating evidence to support my charges I've got quite a dossier on old B.C. Even my needle nose was impressed. I may be mad, but I'm not a fool."

Nigel lit a cigarette "Good luck to you then, sir. But I'm afraid all this gets me no further with my little problem"

"Let's have the picture."

Nigel gave it to him, briefly. The General's quick intelligence appeared in his comment. "So almost everyone in the firm had the opportunity. You'll

have to go for motive then. Some vindictive type, bless his heart, who wanted to do me down and didn't realize he was doing me a favor"

"Or wanted to injure the firm. Yes." Nigel gazed round at the fusty-looking books which lined the walls. "Did you ever come across a woman called Miles—Millicent Miles?"

"What? The writer? Did I *not?* Absurd woman. Smacked her bottom for her once—metaphorically."

Nigel asked for more. General Thoresby went on,

"Early in 1940, it must have been. My battalion was sitting about on the east coast, waiting for the real war to begin. Troops getting browned off. They sent us some lecturers, including your Miss Miles. She came down and gave a talk about novels. Literature-for-the-tots stuff. Condescending. She bent down so far to our pathetic intellectual level you could hear her stays creak And she dragged in some palaver about how wicked war is. Bad form, under the circumstances. Nobody knows better than the professional soldier that war is about the bloody silliest pastime ever thought up by humanity. And the troops don't like you patronizing them and they were champing with fury before she was halfway through." A reminiscent gleam lit up the General's eye. "So afterward, when she was dining with us in the mess, we did rather take her to bits."

"I'd like to have been there."

"The lady's not a friend of yours? Good. Well, we had some clever chaps; and I read myself, y'know. So we launched a counter-demonstration, a real highbrow free-for-all. The air was thick with chunks of Henry James, Proust, Dostoievsky, *Finnegans Wake*—the whole works. The Miles woman simply couldn't compete Hide like an ox, of course; but after a bit she realized what was happening to her. Didn't like it at all. Outrage by the brutal and licentious soldiery Refined female exposed in all her intellectual nakedness. Handsome sort of woman though, if you like horses"

"Have you met her since?"

"No, thank God."

"She still calls you 'Thor.'"

"Still calls me—? Well, the infernal impudence! Never seen the woman, before that occasion or after Why are we talking about her, anyway?"

"She was working at Wenham & Geraldine's when your proof was interfered with."

This seemed a good curtain line, so Nigel rose to go

"Well, good-by, my boy Enjoyed our chat. Keep me in the picture If you find the miscreant, I'll slip him a thank-offering; or her, as the case may be."

Nigel's next interview was of a very different nature. He had telephoned Mr. Bates, the late Production Manager at Wenham & Geraldine, saying he would like to discuss a business matter with him. Nigel did not usually care for conducting interviews under false pretenses; but in this case he judged it necessary.

Herbert Bates lived in a villa at Golders Green. His black suit, high stiff collar, and rather lugubrious face gave him the appearance of a family retainer—which, in a sense, he had been. His manner, too, was ceremonious, discreet, respectful. A hushed personality.

"If you will come into the lounge, Mr. Strangeways. I think you will find it warm and comfortable in this inclement weather."

Mr. Strangeways explained that, having recently received a large legacy and always been interested in publishing, he was thinking of setting up for himself in the business, and in the meantime had joined Mr. Bates' old firm to get practical experience.

"And no better house could you find for that purpose, if I may say so, Mr. Strangeways."

"It's all very much in the air at present. But, if my plans go forward, Mr. Bates, would you consider taking up the post of Production Manager for me? Miss Wenham speaks of you in the highest terms."

Nigel was extremely relieved to notice that no gleam of eagerness appeared in Mr. Bates' eyes.

"I greatly appreciate the suggestion, sir, and Miss Wenham's kind recommendation," Mr. Bates replied in his tired, toneless voice. "But I fear that, at my age—"

"Oh, come now, Mr Bates, you can't be sixty Surely you don't want to retire permanently yet?"

"Sixty-one next birthday. I had intended to stay on with the firm till I was sixty-five; but—er—events transpired which made a somewhat earlier retirement—ah—feasible."

Nigel nodded gravely at these diplomatic circumlocutions. "I am sure Miss Wenham and Mr Geraldine must have greatly regretted your decision Mr. Ryle's acquaintance I have hardly made as yet; my impression, though, is that he does not quite—" Nigel left the sentence dangling delicately in the air, and Mr Bates came to the lure after a moment's hesitation

"No doubt he will learn Our Ways in good time, sir. I confess I did not always see eye to eye with him myself. A publishing house is not, after all, a factory. Ah well, youth will be served, as they say "

Mr Bates gave a resigned sigh. If this man is capable of bearing resent-

ment, thought Nigel, then thistles can bear figs. Further gentle probing confirmed him in this impression, so he went off on another tack.

"I've just been having a talk with General Thoresby," he said. "Interesting man."

Mr. Bates looked severe. "Disgraceful! I should have expected better from a man of his standing. But you can never trust authors—slippery customers, the lot of them—and no gratitude either A deliberate attempt to involve us in a libel action."

"The attempt has succeeded."

Mr. Bates was flabbergasted, not having heard of the most recent developments, which Nigel now summarized for him.

The expression on Mr. Bates' face was that of an old family retainer who has found a skeleton in the family cupboard—shocked, but a trifle prurient

"And the partners think it must have been done by someone in the firm, you say, sir? God bless my soul! The imagination boggles at such an enormity It is quite unprecedented in Our Annals. I well recollect Mr Protheroe bringing in the proof copy that morning After all that trouble with the author, and falling behind schedule, I was glad to get it off to press I remember passing a remark to that effect, while my secretary was typing a note for the printer and parceling up the proof; and Mr. Protheroe —he was sitting beside me, as it might be the way you are now, sir, except of course that I was at my desk—Mr. Protheroe responding with a witticism to the effect that the soldier's pole had at last fallen—an expression first used, of course, by the Swan of Avon."

"How very interesting"—Nigel's comment referred to the matter rather than the manner of this discourse. "So Mr. Protheroe was with you all the time you were having the proof dispatched?"

"Just so, sir. A matter of a few minutes perhaps. But we had a very pleasant little chat, I recollect. Conversation with Mr. Protheroe I found all the more agreeable for its being a rare occurrence. An able mind there, Mr. Strangeways whimsical, a little eccentric, perhaps: but keen. Oh, a fine judge of literature is Mr. Protheroe. It will be a sad day for Wenham & Geraldine when Mr. Protheroe reads his last manuscript."

Nigel thought, rather irritably, that all this trouble could have been saved if Stephen had told him he was present when *Time to Fight* was dispatched from Mr. Bates' department. The late Production Manager could clearly be eliminated from suspicion He could not so easily be shaken off, however. Combining the upper servant's passion for gossip with the power to make it sound like the stately exchanges of old fashioned diplomacy, Mr. Bates offered no conversational loopholes through which the visitor could escape.

If he could not be stopped, though, he could be switched. And Nigel switched him onto the present partners in Wenham & Geraldine. Liz Wenham, he already knew, was the founder's granddaughter. Arthur Geraldine was a great-nephew of the original John Geraldine. Though Arthur was technically the senior partner, Liz Wenham in Mr. Bates' view provided the firm's mainspring: she had her grandfather's head for business. She was not always, however, quite so happy in her dealings with authors (Mr. Bates' lips primmed at the mention of these distasteful but necessary adjuncts to a publishing business). Here was the strength of Mr. Geraldine, who had "a way with him" and conducted much of the personal negotiations with the *genus irritabile.* Mr. Geraldine also possessed an almost uncanny flair for estimating in advance the sale of a book. This, Mr. Bates gratuitously pointed out, is the most essential requirement for success as a publisher: print too large a first impression, and you are left with a load of unsold stock on your hands; print too few at the start, and you may be unable to reprint soon enough to satisfy the unexpected demand. Either way, money is lost. Mr. Geraldine had the priceless faculty for preassessing the public response in terms of copies sold.

After a number of anecdotes illustrating this gift of Mr. Geraldine's, Mr. Bates moved on to the new partner. Basil Ryle had replaced a Mr Charles Wainwright, who was killed in a motor accident the previous year. Ryle had started his own publishing business after the war. It had promised well at first; but rapidly rising costs, and the lack of a good solid backlist, had defeated him. Last year, when it became evident that he was nearing the rocks, Wenham & Geraldine had begun negotiations with him, finally taking over the stock and good will of his business and giving him a partnership.

"Was Miss Miles part of his stock, so to speak?" asked Nigel.

"He had not published her; but I believe he had commissioned her autobiography—or at any rate, was negotiating for it."

"A valuable property."

"In terms of potential sales, I agree."

"But not in any other terms?"

"The author's life has been, I am told, somewhat irregular," pronounced Mr. Bates.

"Her book," Nigel could not resist asking, "might be calculated to bring a blush to the young girl's cheek?"

"I doubt if it will prove to be wholesome family reading," Mr. Bates assented. "You know, perhaps, that she is a divorcee?"

Nigel expressed suitable horror.

"Married three times Not to mention—hr'rm."

"You don't say so! Any children?"

"There is a son by the first marriage. Cyprian Gleed. A ne'er-do-weel, I regret to say. Gave us great trouble a few months ago."

"What? Gave the firm trouble, you mean?"

"Yes He wanted us to back him in starting a literary periodical. He's one of those young fellows who never settle down to anything—Bohemian—a hanger-on of the world of letters."

"He was refused?"

"Certainly. Miss Wenham and Mr. Geraldine were rightly adamant. But he pestered them for quite a time—kept turning up, with or without an appointment. His mother made it all the more difficult: she had been lent a room to work in, and we could not very well refuse him access to *her* "

"When did this happen?"

"A few months ago. Let me see, last July it would have been."

"You don't remember if he paid one of those visits the day *Time to Fight* was sent to press?"

"I'm afraid not. But, if you are interested, Miss Sanders could tell you—our receptionist. She makes a note of every visitor."

IV *VERSO*

Nigel got back to Angel Street just before the main door of Wenham & Geraldine was shut. He had glanced through the evening papers on the Tube: one carried a review of *Time to Fight*, mentioning but not quoting its strong criticisms of Sir Charles Blair-Chatterley; another had a news story about the injunction and the withdrawal of the book, followed by a brief account of the trouble in the Colony after General Thoresby had been superseded as O C the troops there. The third made no mention at all of the book or the impending libel action.

The gipsyish Somerville graduate was at her desk in the reception room Nigel, who had decided that he could not ask her for the information he wanted in his role of specialized reader, said straight out, "Mr. Geraldine tells me you keep a record of all visitors to the office, Miss Sanders."

"That is so."

"Would you please tell me who came in during the afternoon of July 23rd and the morning of July 24th."

The girl looked mystified, and a little distressed "I'm not sure if—I mean—"

"Ring Mr. Geraldine and ask him if it's all right for you to give me the information."

She did so, then took out from a drawer a large leather-bound book and turned over the pages—rather slowly, as if she were also turning over some problem in her mind. "July the 23rd, you said? Here we are Afternoon. General Thoresby, Mr. Leeson-Williams, Miss Miles . . " She recited a list of some dozen names. "July 24th. Mr. Ainsley, Miss Miles, Mr. Bellison. Mr. Smith, Mr. Ritchie, Mrs Vane, Miss Holloway, Rev Dowle That's up to midday on the 24th."

Nigel had noticed an almost imperceptible pause between the names of Bellison and Smith, but made no direct comment on it. "That's all, is it?" he asked.

"That's all." Her eyes met his with a bold, level look, as she dropped the book back into the drawer. If she had any curiosity about Nigel's odd request, she refrained from showing it.

Nigel thanked her, went out of the room, rang for the lift, took it up to the first floor, quietly got out and came down the stairs.

"Left my evening papers here," he said as he entered the reception room again. Miss Sanders, taken by surprise, had no time to conceal the leather-bound book or the ink eraser. Coloring furiously, she resisted for a moment his attempt to take the book from her, then, with a shrug, yielded it.

Not looking at the book, Nigel asked, "Why were you rubbing out Cyprian Gleed's name?"

"I wasn't doing anything of—"

"That's not very bright, for a First in History" Nigel opened the book at July 24th, exhibiting, between the entries of "Mr. Bellison" and "Mr Smith," the half-erased name of Miss Miles' son

"Who the hell *are* you?" the girl angrily exclaimed. "An efficiency expert or something? It's absolutely intolerable—"

"Why were you rubbing out Cyprian Gleed's name?"

"I refuse to tell you."

"Just don't like the name? I'm not surprised"

This provocation had the desired effect The girl blurted out, "Cyprian is— If you must know, he came to see me privately. The firm doesn't encourage followers during office hours, and I didn't want you to go tattling to the partners about it, as you seem to be some sort of spy."

"If it was a private visit, and such visits are frowned upon, it's strange you should have entered his name in the book at all."

Miss Sanders flushed again. "It becomes quite mechanical," she said.

"Even with 'followers'?"

"You're foully offensive!"

"It was your word, not mine. How long was Mr. Gleed in the building, do you remember?"

"He was in this room the whole time," the girl protested.

Nigel made no comment on the wording of her reply

"Do you remember the exact time? . . No, for heaven's sake don't lie about it Presumably Mr. Smith and Mr. Bellison had appointments, and that would fix the time Cyprian Gleed arrived"

"He came in around half past ten, I think, and stayed for—no, I can't remember—it wouldn't have been very long And now, what *is* all this about?"

"My dear girl, you know quite well what we're talking about."

"Cyprian is a man of absolute integrity."

"Good. Then why need you get into such a state? A man of integrity would never have played that trick with *Time to Fight*"—Nigel held up the proof copy—"to get his own back on the firm for their refusal to back his literary magazine. Would he?"

"Everyone misjudges Cyprian," said the girl miserably. "If they'd only give him a chance—"

She took off her spectacles and began polishing them vigorously: her eyes looked bleared and strangely naked.

"Well," said Nigel, smiling as he handed her back the leather-bound book, "I must be about my sinister business. Cheer up. All is not lost. Not yet, anyway."

Nigel plodded upstairs to Stephen Protheroe's room Stephen gave him a preoccupied glance, then buried his head again in the typescript he was reading. He appeared to read with his nose, which hovered over the pages like a humming-bird hawkmoth, darting down now and then as if to smell the author's style, twitching and sniffing frequently. After sampling thus several pages of the book, he exclaimed "Faugh!" scribbled a few words on a sheet of paper, attached it to the typescript, and looked up at Nigel again.

"They say that every man has one good book in him. They are wrong Where've you been?"

"Talking to people, Mr. Bates, for instance."

"And what was he buzzing in your ears?"

"He said you were present when he sent *Time to Fight* to press."

"If he says so, no doubt I was. Why?"

"Well, he couldn't have tampered with the proof: you'd have seen him"

"But I told you he wouldn't have done it. Bates is a bore, but not otherwise flagitious."

"There's a difference between 'wouldn't' and 'couldn't.' If, as he claims, you took the proof into his room and stayed there talking while a covering note was written and the proof wrapped up, your evidence clears Bates"

"Good. Then I'll give that evidence."

"But do you actually *remember* that it was so?" asked Nigel patiently.

"Too long ago. But I'm sure Bates is right. He is totally devoid of imagination and therefore he could not have imagined it."

With this Nigel had to be content. Stephen's eye was already straying toward another typescript.

"Did Miss Miles' son visit her that morning?" Nigel asked.

"That young clot? May have, for all I know He was infesting the office last summer."

"You don't happen to have a note of the date his proposition was turned down?"

"No. I'll ask." Stephen dialed a number on the internal telephone. "Arthur? Stephen. What date did you and Liz turn down young Gleed's horrible scheme for a literary mag? You had a final meeting with him, didn't

you? . . . July 21st. Thanks." Stephen turned back to Nigel. "July 21st. Sinister coincidence, eh? Oh, I forgot. Ryle said he'd like a word with you when you got back."

Nigel left the little man, his gnomelike head floating in a pool of yellowish light from the unshaded bulb, and went down to Basil Ryle's room. The junior partner was at his desk, conferring with a depressed-looking middle-aged woman.

"Just one moment, Strangeways. Take a chair." Ryle handed the woman an advertisement pull. "This was yours, Miss Griffin? Look at it again Do you really think any living soul is going to be attracted to the book by this advertisement? 'A charming novel about young love, in an East Anglian setting.' Sets the blood on fire, doesn't it? Fills one with seething curiosity."

"Well, I'm sure I—"

"We pay £25 for the space. If it doesn't catch the reader's attention, we might as well give the money to a home for lost dogs."

"What about 'a broad on the Broads'?" suggested Nigel.

Miss Griffin received the suggestion unsmilingly. "I don't think Mr. Geraldine would care for—"

"We're not selling the book to Mr. Geraldine," Ryle broke in. "We're trying to sell it to a lot of dopes, who'd much rather be looking at television. Wait a minute—what's the heroine's name? Helen. It *would* be. 'Nelly or Telly'? Something on those lines? No. They'd choose Telly every time. I've got it—'The tale of a Suffolk Helen who broke all hearts.' "

"But actually, Mr. Ryle—"

"I daresay she didn't. But ninety per cent of novel readers are women, and ninety-nine per cent of women would like to think they leave a trail of broken hearts behind them All right, Miss Griffin "

Miss Griffin retired, with a look that suggested the breaking of heads rather than of hearts.

"The trouble with this firm is advertising in a sort of well-bred undertone, like a butler offering red wine or white." Basil Ryle ruffled his mop of ginger hair, and suddenly looked very young indeed. "Well, how've you been getting on?"

Nigel gave him a censored account of his interview with General Thoresby and a fuller one of the talk with Mr Bates.

"You can count Bates out, I think."

"Yes, I suppose so." Ryle bit his nails. He seemed jumpy. no doubt, being a live wire he would "But what about clues? Fingerprints, I mean? Handwriting? I'd have thought that's the first thing you'd be after."

"I've asked one of the handwriting experts at Scotland Yard to look at the

proof this evening. He's a friend of mine. But one word, written twice in block capitals, isn't likely to get us anywhere. Fingerprints? The proof copy will be covered with them, for one thing. Besides, do you think the partners will let me fingerprint everyone in the building?"

"Why not?"

"Including Miss Miles?"

"Millicent? How does she come into it?"

Ryle's tone was sharp. Under stress, a slight coarseness could be heard in his vowels. Provincial boy, from lower-middle-class parents, who had made good—that accounts for the way he throws his weight about with subordinates like Miss Griffin, thought Nigel, he's touchy, and will need careful handling. He studied for a moment the red-haired young man, who had tilted his chair back against the wall—the neat, dark suit, the soft collar and tie rumpled.

"Miss Miles had a motive for doing it; two motives, actually."

"Motive? Come off it."

"She had been humiliated in public, during the war, by General Thoresby. And this firm has refused to reprint some of her novels."

"You call that a motive?"

"For an egotistic and vindictive woman it could be."

Basil Ryle pushed himself from the wall, the front legs of his chair coming down with a bang "You set up as a professional judge of character, do you?" he dangerously began "Now see here— Yes, what is it?"

An attractive blonde had entered the room.

"Your letters, Mr. Ryle."

"Oh, damn the letters!"

"You said you wanted them to go off by the six o'clock post. It's five to six."

Basil Ryle started signing a sheaf of letters in a folder on his desk. "You want to meet the boy friend at six, I suppose."

This bit of badinage sounded curiously artificial and unconvincing, as though he had learned it from a correspondence course. The blond secretary was looking down at Ryle's head in a maternal, almost intimate way He's all thumbs where girls are concerned, thought Nigel, yet they feel an attraction.

" 'Colophon' has only one 'l,' Daphne All right, I've altered it. . . . Here you are. Run along, and don't let him take any liberties."

"Good night, Mr. Ryle."

When the girl had left, Basil Ryle fidgeted with the pulls on his desk,

then jerked out, "You free for a bit? Let's go and have a drink. I'm sick of this office."

They left the building, silent now and with only one or two passage lights burning, by the side door. The night air was clammy cold, but Ryle inhaled it vigorously.

"That's more like it," he said, then, cocking his head toward the Thames, "Never thought I'd want to see a river again. My dad was a welder on Tyneside. One of the casualties of the Slump. Just rotted quietly away. Poor old dad." In the lamplight, as he glanced up at the elegant façade of Angel Street, his face wore a pleased, incredulous look, as though he could hardly believe yet in the fortune which had brought him here. "My dad was a great reader. Plenty of time for it, too, after 1930. And the public library was warm. But you can't eat books."

He led Nigel into the private bar of a small pub, tucked away between Angel Street and the Strand "Not many know of this place. We can have a quiet talk " The bar was indeed empty; and with its high-backed settles and cheerful fire, it had a countrified feel. Ryle ordered a double whisky and chaser for himself, Hollands for Nigel.

"Millicent Miles," he said abruptly. "You know her well?"

"I only met her today."

"Well, I do And I'm telling you, she's a greatly misjudged woman. She had a rough time when she was young. Like me. It scars you. It's all very well for a highbrow like Protheroe to turn up his nose at her books. Of course, they're escape stuff—"

"Escape from what?"

According to Basil Ryle, Millicent had been the daughter of a drunken father, who went bankrupt when she was in her early teens, and a slut of a mother Her parents quarreled incessantly; the father's temper was unpredictable—he would beat the small girl, then drool over her in alcoholic remorse; the mother used her as an unpaid slavey. Millicent had run away from home at the age of seventeen and got a job as a shop assistant. Her miserable and repressed girlhood had generated the fantasies which later made her the darling of the lending libraries.

"You've been reading her autobiography?" asked Nigel.

"No She told me all this " During his narration, Ryle had put down several whiskies, and the effect was beginning to tell "You probably think she's a hard-boiled number You're quite wrong. Underneath, she's a damned sight more vulnerable than most of the sensitive plants of both sexes you meet."

"When did you first meet her?"

"And lonely too. At one of those literary cocktail parties Some years ago. Before I was in business on my own. I said to her, straight off, total stranger, 'You look lonely ' Extraordinary—don't know what possessed me to do it. And she said, "You're the first man who has realized that.' I could see she'd had a rough passage with men. Don't believe everything you're told about her."

"I won't."

"What's that?"

"I said 'I won't.' "

"Good for you. Have another drink. No, I insist. Hollands again? . . . Where were we? Yes. A rough passage. Do you know, when she was nineteen a man seduced her; promised to marry her—the usual story—then left her in the muck; baby was stillborn Oh, she's been through the hoops. Married a stockbroker or something a year later, just to get away from poverty. That's when she started writing. To get away from the stockbroker, if you ask me."

"She has a son by him, hasn't she?"

"Cyprian. Yes."

"What's he like?"

"A sponge." His drinking had carried Ryle rapidly through the animated to the melancholy stage. "A sponge with a beard. Sucks up her money like water."

"Was he very annoyed when Wenham & Geraldine turned down his project for a magazine?"

"I expect so." Ryle was already uninterested in the egregious Cyprian. "That's one reason why I wanted the firm to reprint some of her novels. She needs the money. She's absurdly generous, you know: offered to put some into my own business, but it was too late by then "

"But there are other reasons?" suggested Nigel.

Basil Ryle glared at him owlishly. "What a damned lot of questions you ask. Like one of those Bloomsbury relics. Always probing and prodding away, as if a personal relationship was a piece of meat on a grill You in the war?"

"Not to speak of."

"I saw a crew after their tank had burned up Talk about grilled! You know what's wrong with your generation? You believe in goodness, kindness, decency. Other things being equal, decency will always prevail—that's what your lot think. It's bloody pathetic."

Nigel let that one go past. He got Ryle talking about his start in publishing. Immediately after the war, he had gone into an advertising firm and

quickly worked his way up. Millicent Miles' third husband was one of their clients—a wealthy, literary-minded manufacturer; he took a fancy to Basil, discovered his ambition for publishing, and found him the necessary financial backing to start a publishing business.

"It was like a fairytale," said Ryle. "But it didn't have a fairytale ending."

Nigel could imagine the tough, provincial young man flattered by Millicent Miles' interest, dazzled a bit by the world into which she introduced him. And no doubt she had kept him dangling: she couldn't do without a string of admiring men. But how had she kept him so long? Concealed her essential hardness and egotism so long from him? He must have a soft streak in him, a romantic streak; or perhaps it had something to do with the decency he claimed to disbelieve in—a loyalty which kept his eyes shut.

Leading the conversation back to Millicent Miles, Nigel learned that she had divorced her first husband—the stockbroker—who was now dead; her second, a neurotic racing motorist, had shot himself; the third, Basil's patron, had divorced her a year ago.

"She feels she is doomed never to make a go of it, never to be happy for long," said Ryle. "Poor girl She *is* a girl still, you know, underneath all that camouflage."

Oh dear oh dear, thought Nigel, so you are in love with her, you're to be Mr. Right and pick up the pieces and put her together again.

"That's another reason why I'd like to reprint a few of the novels," Ryle continued. "It might help to set up her morale. And, as I say, with that leech Cyprian around, she needs money "

"But the other partners are against it?"

"Geraldine doesn't object Liz Wenham is pretty lukewarm, I admit But Protheroe's the real obstacle."

"Surely he doesn't have all that say in what you publish?"

Getting up, Basil Ryle poked the fire viciously, then leaned on the mantelpiece, staring without enthusiasm at an advertisement of a naked young woman offering the public a bottle of sparkling cider.

"Protheroe's been the firm's literary adviser for twenty-five years," he said at last. "And it's true he's never turned down a book which some other firm then accepted and had a success with. I give him that. But he's getting a bit fusty now; won't look at anything that isn't what he calls 'written'—not in the fiction line. Well, fine writing's on its way out Anyway, the answer is that the partners wouldn't take on anything he was dead against, unless they were both enthusiastic about it."

"They were enthusiastic about Miss Miles' autobiography, then?"

"Not wildly. But I'd given her a contract to write it while I still had my own business, so Wenham & Geraldine more or less had to take it over."

"Over Protheroe's dead body?"

"No. He didn't make a fuss about that, I believe—only about the novels. But he does seem to have a down on Millicent."

"Something out of the past? Perhaps they knew each other—"

"No. I asked Millicent, and she said she'd never met him till last summer. Dried-up little runt. What's *he* ever produced? One slim volume of verse."

"A great one, possibly."

"Do you think so? I've read it All lust and disgust. Venus and vinegar" Basil Ryle slowly applied the lighted end of his cigarette to the belly of the girl on the advertisement. "Sex!" he muttered "Why can't they keep it for the dark?"

V *RUN ON*

Next morning, Thursday, Nigel Strangeways entered Angel Street a little before half past nine. It was another of those gray days, the skyline a dirty dishcloth, houses and trees, the river and its bridges all looking as if they had been smeared over with a film of grease. A metallic cold in the air outside; and a nip in Miss Sanders' voice as she returned his "good morning." Mr. Gleed, she bleakly announced, wished to see him, and was coming at eleven o'clock for that purpose.

"Good. That'll save me a lot of trouble. Ask him to leave his knuckle-dusters with you for safekeeping."

Miss Sanders frowned at this flippancy. One could imagine the disapproving look she might have cast upon a don who had let slip some frivolous remark on a serious subject during a tutorial. How very *stern* the young are, thought Nigel as he went upstairs; one keeps forgetting it. Basil Ryle last night with his censorious line about sex. but that's the old-fashioned working-class puritanism; and anyway he can't be much over thirty, but emotionally undeveloped?—time will show.

Stephen Protheroe was already at work, nosing his way through a bulky typescript, and returned Nigel's salutation absently. A word caught his attention. His long nose dipped at the page like a woodpecker's beak.

"Another fellow who says 'disinterested' when he means 'uninterested,' " he snarled. "This debasing of the language is intolerable."

"Words have changed their meanings in the past."

"That's not the point. The point is, there's no synonym for 'disinterested.' We can't afford to lose the word."

"Perhaps we've lost what the word means."

"Lost disinterestedness? As an ideal? I wonder." The little man's face was suddenly sad—ravaged by a sadness Nigel had rarely seen: the blank eyes, the downturned corners of the mouth changed it into a tragic mask It was scarred with deep furrows—riverbeds grooved out by emotional torrents long ago run dry.

"You haven't got a *Who's Who*, have you?" Nigel asked.

Stephen dragged himself out of whatever pit of sorrow, regret, remorse he had been plunged in "The last room down the passage has a reference library," he said.

Nigel went out, passed Miss Miles' door (the typewriter within was silent), and entered the large room beyond it. A young, disheveled but attractive blonde, considerably less scholarly-looking than most of the firm's female employees, was combing her hair at a pocket mirror.

"Oh," she uttered, in a sort of refined yelp. "You quite took me by surprise."

"Please don't get up. My name's Strangeways, and I'm working in Mr. Protheroe's room I came to look for a *Who's Who.*"

The girl appeared to be dazed by this request.

"Well, I don't know if—you see, I'm not really here."

"You mean, you're a ghost?"

The girl's blue eyes opened incredibly wide. "Ooh no, I assure you. I'm reelly downstairs."

"You amaze me."

"I work in the invoices. But Jean's sick, so I'm here instead. What was it you would be wanting?"

"Who's Who."

"Pardon? Whose Zoo?"

"It's a reference book, called *Who's Who.*"

"Oh, a *book* " The girl's eyes went desperately round the room, which was lined with books from floor to ceiling "We don't have anything to do with the books *here.*" She sought for inspiration in the ceiling. "Now Mr. Protheroe—he knows about the books. Why don't you try him?"

"But Mr. Protheroe sent me here."

"Well, isn't that funny?"

"Perhaps if I looked round the shelves—"

"You're welcome, I'm sure."

"It's got a fat red back."

The girl giggled. "You are *naughty.*"

Nigel glanced over the shelves. File copies of the Wenham & Geraldine publications, going back over a hundred years. In the far corner, by the window, two shelves of reference books. Taking out the one he wanted, Nigel turned to the name of Millicent Miles, and began jotting down notes. The blonde leaned over his shoulder, enthralled.

"Would Johnny Ray be there?"

"I don't know. Who's he?"

The blue eyes opened so wide that Nigel felt in imminent danger of being engulfed. "Who's Johnny Ray? He's— Go on! You're sending me up!"

"Go on yourself."

"He's a singer. He's my heart throb."

"Lucky chap!"

The blonde, temporarily unfaithful to her heart throb, pressed more heavily against Nigel's shoulder, as he turned to another name in *Who's Who.*

"You know, you remind me of a film star—in one of those corny old films —my boy friend took me to it—he's a highbrow, my boy friend I mean. Now, what *was* his name? Burgess Meredith."

"Don't tell anyone," whispered Nigel into her shell-like ear, "but I *am* Burgess Meredith. Who are you?"

"Don't be silly! Oh, I see. Susan—Susan Jones. But honestly, you're not reelly—?"

"Ssh!" hissed Nigel "I'm actually a famous detective, a private eye disguised as Nigel Strangeways disguised as Burgess Meredith."

The girl laughed merrily, shaking her white-gold hair against his cheek "A detective! That's one thing you aren't—anybody could see."

When he had finished taking notes and replaced the volume, Nigel said, "You must be lonely here all by yourself all day. Still, you've got plenty to read."

"I *hate* books. You can have the lot, for me. Now my boy friend—he's a great reader. always got his head stuck in a book. It fair gives me the creeps sometimes."

"Waste of time, when he's got a girl like you."

"That's what I tell him. We're only young once, aren't we? Meaning nothing personal, I'm sure, Mr. Mer— Mr. Strangeways." She gave him a languishing glance. "I like the mature type, myself."

"You be careful, young Susan. I'm at the dangerous age. And all these books around us rouse the passions."

"Ooh, you are *rude!*" cried the delighted girl.

After a little more of this sort of thing, Nigel inquired if she had come into contact with Miss Miles at all.

"That stuck-up cow? Give me air! Ooh, she's not a friend of yours, is she?"

"No. Doesn't anyone here like her?"

"Between you and I, they say Mr. Ryle's a bit—you know. Shocking, I call it. Old enough to be his mother."

"And what about Mr. Protheroe?"

"Oh, *he* can't stick her. Everyone knows that. Soon after she started camping here, they had words."

"*Did* they? What sort of words?"

"I didn't hear it myself. But my friend Jean, she happened to go into Mr. Protheroe's room for a moment, and they were at it hammer and tongs next door. She was being ever so offensive to Mr. Protheroe."

"How?"

"Well, Jeanie hadn't time to catch on what it was all about. But she heard Miss Miles calling him Goggles. Ever so cold and nasty: like Bette Davis. Well, I mean, he's no Marlon Brando, but—"

"Was Jean sure she was *calling him* that?"

"She heard Miss Miles say 'Goggles.' Twice. Extra loud. She didn't catch the rest. Except they were both steamed up. But, with those gig-lamp spectacles Mr. Protheroe wears—well, it stands to reason she was passing a personal remark, doesn't it?"

"It's not his nickname here?"

"Oh no Some call him the Prawn, I believe "

"Goggles. Who wears goggles?"

"Well, motorcyclists. And—"

"You'll be all agoggled to hear, Susan, that Miss Miles' second husband was a racing motorist."

On this satisfactory exit line, Nigel departed, leaving Susan Jones with her eyes as big and blue as a Hollywood star's swimming pool.

Nigel spent the next quarter of an hour in a conducted tour of the building. He wanted to fix its layout clearly in his mind, and Stephen Protheroe professed himself happy to get away from his manuscripts for a while. Starting on the third floor—the editorial department, which included the reference library and a studio—they descended to the second, occupied by the partners, their secretaries, and the advertising department. The first floor housed the strictly business side of the firm, the Production Manager's office, the accounts department, the invoice room, and so on. Finally, on the ground floor, there was the reception room, the trade department, the very large room where, under neon lighting and to the strains of music from the Light Programme, the packers worked, and an even larger storeroom beyond it.

"So there it is," said Stephen when they had returned. "Simple but symbolic. On the third floor Enlightenment, on the first floor Mammon; and the partners sandwiched between the two."

Nigel had noticed that his guide was received everywhere with the deference which might have been given only to a partner; but also, that there was no kowtowing in this deference—Stephen was evidently popular with the staff, and as far as Nigel could tell, the staff seemed on good terms among themselves. Stephen had affected a certain vagueness as to what

went on in other departments, but answered Nigel's specific questions without difficulty.

For the next half hour Nigel examined the folder on his table. It contained the data he had asked for yesterday: a list of the staff, their periods of service and their duties; and a sheaf of pension forms, on which each employee had written his name in block capitals, and his signature beneath it. Nigel had never expected to get a lead from this, and he did not. He had asked for the data mainly to give an impression of efficiency. He put the pension forms in a large envelope: his friend at Scotland Yard might be able to make something of them, though to Nigel one man's block capitals were indistinguishable from another's.

"Can graphologists identify block capitals?" asked Stephen Protheroe, who had looked up from his work at this moment.

"Almost impossible, I should think, on a single short word like 'Stet.' Of course, if you've got some eccentricity, like crossing your T's from right to left, or forming a letter with an upstroke which is normally done with a downstroke—they'd be onto that."

"I thought so. How can you set about an investigation like this, then?"

"Look for motive. And opportunity. That narrows it down a bit. Which reminds me—Cyprian Gleed is coming to see me shortly. Where can I—?"

Protheroe jerked a thumb over his shoulder "In there, if you like. The Medusa seems to be exercising her charms elsewhere this morning What does *he* want?"

"We shall see Did you ever come across her second husband?"

"Young Gleed's her son by her first."

"I know. I mean the racing motorist."

"No. I'm not a habitué of the pits."

"Shot himself, I'm told."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Stephen Protheroe's mouth made its nibbling, fishlike movement. "Some commit suicide, others have suicide thrust upon them."

The telephone rang. Mr. Gleed was here to see Mr. Strangeways. "Send him to the room where Miss Miles works," said Protheroe.

The figure that entered was far from prepossessing. a young man, not more than five feet six inches tall, in stovepipe trousers and a stained duffel coat, his pasty complexion rendered still whiter by a straggle of black beard and a black sombrero hat.

"You're Strangeways, are you?" he aggressively remarked, teeth flashing white behind the beard "What the devil do you mean by insulting Miss Sanders?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you Have a cigarette."

Cyprian Gleed's hand went out automatically to the proffered case, then withdrew.

"Thank you, no. I don't like soft soap."

Nigel reflected that, judging from his appearance, Gleed did not like soap of any kind The young man had flung himself into the armchair; he was trembling violently, and furious with himself for trembling, and therefore trembling all the more.

"By what right did you bully Miriam—Miss Sanders—into telling you—"

"No bullying. She told me a lie and I exposed it I've every right to do so. The firm has called me in to investigate the recent trouble here."

"What trouble?"

"Surely your mother told you about the libel case—"

"Oh, *that*. So you think your Gestapo methods are justified by— But how am I supposed to come into it?"

Cyprian Gleed was the type of moral weakling, Nigel judged, who must always be whipping himself up into aggressiveness to conceal from others his own lack of self-assurance.

"You come into it," Nigel equably replied, "because you were in this building at a time when the proof copy could have been tampered with, and because a project of yours had been turned down by the firm a couple of days before."

Cyprian's voice was contemptuous. "I suppose a private detective, or whatever you call yourself, is bound to have the keyhole mentality. Do you really think I care a damn if some tinpot general gets himself into trouble?"

"Why did you come back here, *after* your project had been turned down?"

"I came to see Miriam."

"But then you went upstairs."

Nigel made it sound like a statement, though he had no proof of it as yet.

"What if I did? I'm allowed to see my own mother, aren't I?" Annoyed with his weakness in replying, Cyprian gave another spurt of anger. "And why the bloody hell should I answer your questions?"

"You're not compelled to. Why, for that matter, *shouldn't* you co-operate? Or have you got a vindictive feeling against Wenham & Geraldine?"

The young man's eyes rolled, a trick recalling his mother.

"If you really think a writer has nothing better to do than go about feeling vindictive over his rejection slips—"

"I'm sure I should."

Gleed was taken aback, but then responded to Nigel's sincerity, launching into a tirade about what he called "the Establishment." This, it seemed, was a formidable, reactionary, cunning and cryptic body of people—editors, publishers and writers—who operated like a Black Hand in the world of literature, promoting their own interests and blocking the efforts of anyone outside the circle. It was men like Stephen Protheroe, he declared, who were the kingpins of this racket—*éminences grises* controlling literary policy, directing trends, giving the jobs to the boys, assassinating the outsiders. The Establishment was based in London, but had its agents in the provinces too; it controlled not only publishing the literary pages of the metropolitan newspapers and weeklies, but also the B.B.C., the Arts Council, the British Council and the older universities. It was all the more of a menace because its members were, or professed themselves to be, unaware of its existence. A self-elected oligarchy, they subtly extended their influence or ruthlessly protected their own interests, but with no greater individual consciousness of their corporate aims than is possessed by coral insects or particles of smog. It was to expose and combat this sinister, if amorphous, body that Cyprian Gleed had proposed to start a literary magazine.

He spoke with genuine conviction; but Nigel found his views none the less tedious, and finally broke in,

"Well, that may be so But it's outside my present job. I'm faced with a question of elimination."

"I'm not interested in your bowel problems," snapped Cyprian, annoyed at being cut off short.

"You had opportunity and motive."

"Motive? I don't even know this bone-headed General of yours."

"No. But as a leader of the guerrillas—"

"What on earth—?"

"As a general in this holy war against the establishment, you would naturally want to kick off its most influential members. You've just told me that Stephen Protheroe is one of them " Nigel had noticed that the sliding window was open; he hoped Stephen was getting an earful. "Mr Protheroe was in charge of the proof copy. He had far the best opportunity to do the dirty work, and was bound to be under the gravest suspicion. By stetting the libelous passages, Mr. Gleed, you knew you had a good chance of losing him his job. Down goes one of the pillars of the establishment."

After an amazed silence, Cyprian Gleed found his voice. "But that's absolutely—" He was about to say "fantastic"; but to say it would be to half admit that his idea of an Establishment was itself fantastic. "I really can't

discuss this. I came here to get an apology from you for the insolent way you treated Miss Sanders."

"Your journey has been in vain, then. Good morning."

Trembling again, Cyprian scratched at his straggly beard. "Very well. I shall report your behavior to the partners."

Nigel, ignoring this, put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and began typing. He was pretty sure that Cyprian Gleed had not come here to take up the cudgels for Miss Sanders: Cyprian hardly seemed the chivalrous type. After biting his nails for a bit and glancing covertly at Nigel, the young man said,

"Perhaps I've been rather outspoken."

Nigel stopped typing, and looked at him silently.

"I've no objection to talking about your problem, actually."

I was right, thought Nigel· he came here to pump me. But on whose behalf? His mother's? His own? Cyprian now answered Nigel's questions with apparent frankness Yes, he had come to Wenham & Geraldine's the morning of July 24th. Somewhere around 10:30, he thought. After a few words with Miriam, he had gone upstairs. Why? To see his mother. Why? Well, actually he'd run short of money and wanted an advance on his allowance; he'd failed to catch her before she left her house for the office. How did he remember this, when it had happened months ago? He had examined the stub of his mother's checkbook, which showed that it was on July 24th she had given him the advance.

"You were lucky," remarked Nigel. "I can't imagine many writers liking to be interrupted in the middle of their work with a request for money."

"Oh, that was part of my plan When I came in, I started reading a page of her typescript and buttered her up about it," said Cyprian, with appalling candor. "She has abnormal vanity, even for a woman writer. And I don't usually take any interest in her work—it's entirely worthless, of course. So that did the trick."

"I see."

"When I'd got the check, I beat it—before she could change her mind. So, you see I couldn't have done anything to that proof, even if I'd wanted to. I was in here with her all the time. I expect she'd remember, if you asked her."

"But you could have nipped into the next-door room before visiting you mother?"

"I could have. But it wouldn't have been any good—not if I'd wanted to fiddle with the proof."

"Because Mr. Protheroe was there?"

"No. Because my mother was there."

Betraying none of the emotion this statement roused in him, Nigel got up and closed the sliding window.

"How do you know?"

"I saw her through that little window."

"Saw her talking to Protheroe?"

"No She was alone. She'd gone in to borrow an eraser. Actually, she was looking for it on his desk when I peeped through. I called to her, and she came straight back here. So she can give me an alibi." Nigel contemplated Cyprian so steadily that the young man added, with a roll of the eyes, "Honestly. You've only to ask her. Well, I suppose she mightn't remember, but—"

"I don't doubt you." Nigel continued to study him. Cyprian was clearly *capable de tout,* but did he know just what he was saying? "I don't doubt you. But I might doubt the eraser."

"What do you mean?"

"Your mother could have been tampering with the proof," said Nigel flatly. Cyprian Gleed received the suggestion with none of the moral indignation he had evinced over Miriam Sanders; indeed, there was something like a gleam in his eye—a vicious, calculating gleam he at once suppressed.

"I suppose she could. It hadn't occurred to me."

"Do you think she would?"

"Well, psychologically I wouldn't put it past her. Women of that type sometimes enjoy making mischief, you know. Or it can be the change of life."

"Who would she want to make mischief for?" asked Nigel, getting up and going to a far corner of the room to put this execrable young man out of range of his boot.

"Oh, just mischief in the abstract Mischief for mischief's sake." Cyprian was evidently about to enlarge on this when the door was flung open and the subject of the discussion swept in.

"I told you not to come here again," she said harshly. "It's useless. You're not getting a penny." Miss Miles became aware of Nigel's presence. Her personality seemed to go out, then light up again in a quite different pattern, like an electric advertisement, all in an instant. "Oh, good morning, Mr. Strangeways. So sorry to interrupt you. I didn't know you knew each other."

"We didn't," said Cyprian. "Strangeways was interviewing me—"

"I'm *so* glad. Cyprian's the brains of the family. I know he'd do

splendidly if someone gave him the sort of work that suits him—wouldn't you, dear boy?"

"Not that sort of interview," replied the dear boy sourly. "Strangeways is a detective."

Laying her handbag on the table, Millicent Miles sat down. Her son was still sprawled in the armchair, contemplating her with the look of one who perceives that a difficult sum is coming out right after all.

"A detective?" she said. "But how fascinating! I'd never have suspected it. And you've been grilling poor Cyprian?"

Young Gleed grinned. "We've been discussing mischief in the abstract—and the concrete, too, *Mother.*" The last word shot out in a venomously satirical tone. "Do you need me any more, Strangeways?"

"No. Good morning."

Cyprian Gleed picked up his black sombrero. He gave his mother a veiled look from the doorway, blew her a kiss, and departed.

"I do wish he'd settle down to something. He's got plenty of talent, but I'm afraid he's become rather a drifter. I blame myself."

"Oh, surely not?"

"That's very sweet of you." She sighed, gave him an appealing, ingenuous look. "But he was the child of a broken marriage. It might have been different if I hadn't divorced his father Though I had cause enough, God knows. But why should I burden you with my little troubles?"

Nigel imagined the dialogue of Millicent Miles' best-sellers must run on very much these lines. Their author proceeded. "You're investigating this business about Thor's book, I suppose?"

"Yes. Your son told me—"

"You're a very naughty man You made me believe you were a new reader, and I'd hoped you'd persuade the firm to reprint those novels of mine."

"Afraid I can't help there. But you've a strong supporter in Mr Ryle"

"Oh, Basil," she said offhandedly. "Yes, I suppose so. He's certainly a very persevering young man. But it's all so difficult." She sighed again. "I've often wondered if it's a good thing to have personal relationships with one's publishers Perhaps it should be kept on a strictly business footing."

Nigel received this outrageous speech without comment. Could she be shocked out of her complacence, self-deception, whatever it was?

"Is your son an inveterate liar?"

"Really, Mr. Strangeways!"

"Can I rely on his evidence?"

"What evidence? I don't understand."

"He told me that he'd seen you in Mr Protheroe's room the morning the proof copy was altered—as good as caught you in the act."

Nigel explained in detail. A sequence of emotions passed over Miss Miles' face, but he could not tell how far they were genuine; she might just have been trying them on and discarding them, like new hats Her final selection was the wounded mother's.

"Oh, Cyprian! How could you," she said brokenly. "What an age we live in, when children bring evidence against their parents. And false evidence too!"

"You weren't in Protheroe's room at all?"

"How can I possibly remember? It was months ago And I've often popped in there."

"Your son came to ask you for an advance on his allowance. Does that recall it?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied, with mournful, hushed sweet dignity. "You see, it's happened so often. Cyprian gets into debt. I can't think what he spends his money on. Oh dear, did he try to borrow from you?"

"No . . . You mustn't mind my asking this—but did you ever see the libelous passages in *Time to Fight?*"

Her brow furrowed with concentration. "Let me think. Of course I knew about them. Mr Protheroe told me the sort of thing Thor said. And I dare say I have seen the proof lying about on his desk. But—"

"And you talked to your son about it?"

"I expect so." Her green eyes opened wide. "Oh, you can't possibly think that Cyprian would do a thing like that?"

Her voice lacked conviction, and Nigel thought it was intended to do so. He felt a profound disgust; talking with emotional twisters, like Millicent Miles and her son, one became tainted oneself. He was never nearer to throwing up the case.

"I'm trying to eliminate the people who couldn't have done it," he said. "Physically or psychologically. Have you known Mr. Geraldine long?"

She gave her rattling, good-comrade laugh. "Now him you *can't* suspect! I met him many years ago. Under rather strange circumstances And then not again till recently. Why?"

"I'm groping in the dark—to find links. Is there any link between Mr. Geraldine and General Thoresby, for instance, apart from the publishing one?"

"I've no idea."

Millicent Miles was visibly losing interest She had an inward look now, as though debating some course of action. Her face hardened

"I must say that second libelous passage is marvelous stuff," said Nigel. He began quoting from it. " 'But the Governor, occupied with the more congenial business of cocktail parties . . . took no action whatsoever except to obstruct the military. . . . As a result of his criminal negligence, there was considerable loss of life and widespread destruction of property. The massacre at the Ulombo'—"

" 'Holocaust,' " interrupted Miss Miles in a distrait voice.

" 'Massacre,' surely?"

"No, 'holocaust.' I've a first-rate verbal memory." She was giving her full attention now. "I particularly remember Stephen reading that bit out to me. It stuck in my mind—the word 'holocaust'—I've never been sure how to spell it. But my spelling's awful, anyway "

A few minutes later Nigel left her. He could not know that one of the questions he had asked this morning would lead directly to a murder.

VI *DELETE*

"What action would you take if I told you that it was Stephen Protheroe who tampered with the proof?"

"I shouldn't believe it," said Liz Wenham. "Apart from anything else, his whole life is bound up with this firm It's quite inconceivable."

"But supposing I gave you absolute proof?" Nigel persisted.

"Well, we'd have to get rid of him," Arthur Geraldine said, after a pause "Oh yes, Liz we would. But surely you haven't—?"

"And he'd find it difficult to get another job?"

"Another job like this—yes."

"But, of course, leaving us would be by far the worst blow to him," said Liz. "I don't mean just financially."

"And we've agreed that he had infinitely more opportunity to do it than anyone else here?"

"Yes, but—" The two partners began speaking together, shocked by the enormity of Nigel's suggestion.

"No, wait a minute," he interrupted. "Stephen had no apparent motive whatsoever, you're saying I agree But perhaps somebody had a very strong motive for discrediting Stephen, ruining him. We've been thinking in terms of a culprit who wanted to damage either the firm or General Thoresby. But all we know so far is that Miss Miles was publicly humiliated by the General fifteen years ago, and that the firm turned down a project of her son's in July. As motives, these seem ludicrously inadequate."

"I agree."

"On the other hand, Stephen Protheroe was the main obstacle here to Miss Miles' having her novels reprinted. She was seen, alone, in his room during the crucial period She knew about the libelous passages—as I told you, her using the word 'holocaust' that time is damned difficult to explain away except as a Freudian slip. She'd not been about the place long enough, in July, to know that you would never sack Protheroe on mere suspicion, however strong."

"But it's all so melodramatic and trivial," said Liz Wenham. "I don't particularly care for Millicent Miles, but I can't see her doing it just to get her novels reprinted."

"If that was her only motive, I'd agree. But I'm convinced she has some much deeper grudge against Stephen."

"How can she? They've only known each other for a few—"

"That's what they say. I don't believe it. They hate each other's guts They talk to each other with a—the sort of familiarity bred by contempt, or hatred—as though they'd grown old in it."

Arthur Geraldine's sharklike mouth stretched in a grimace.

"You may be right. But why should they pretend they'd never met each other before?"

"Why indeed? My head's buzzing with whys. Why, for instance, do Wenham & Geraldine allow Miss Miles to take up residence here indefinitely? She finished moving house months ago, after all."

The senior partner looked a little disconcerted. "It's a tradition of the firm that we should always keep a room available for our authors."

"The fact is, she's extremely difficult to dislodge," said Liz Wenham. "I've hinted often enough. You really must tell her quite definitely, Arthur. You were going to do so in September."

"For that matter," asked Nigel, "why should she want to stay on?"

"Meanness. Saves her burning her own electricity."

"Ah, come now, Liz, she's not as bad as that."

"Or to be on the spot when the proofs of *Time to Fight* came along, in the hope she could get at them somehow and do Protheroe down?" suggested Nigel. "Why else remain next-door neighbor to a man she abominates?"

They were in Mr. Geraldine's room, whither Nigel had been summoned, shortly after his conversation with Millicent Miles, to give a progress report. He had told them that handwriting identification was impossible in this case, and fingerprint tests would probably be useless. The proof had been handled legitimately by at least half a dozen members of the firm, apart from the author, the compositor and Nigel himself. If the culprit was somebody who had no legitimate reason for handling the copy, he would presumably have taken care not to leave prints on it. Nigel was quite prepared, should the partners ask it, to fingerprint everyone in the firm; but Geraldine and Liz Wenham had agreed that, with so little chance of getting results, it would not be worth the trouble involved and the bad feeling among the staff that would ensue. It was decided, therefore, that only those who had been authorized to handle the proof should be asked privately to give Nigel a complete set of fingerprints. If some other prints were then to be found on the proof, the partners would decide what steps should be taken to identify them.

"I should enjoy being present, Arthur, when you asked Miss Miles for her dabs," said Liz, grinning amiably.

"God forbid it should come to that!"

The senior partner was clearly beginning to repent of ever starting this investigation. Engaged with the preliminaries to the libel action, he was looking preoccupied today, though his old-fashioned courtesy did not fail He kept coming back to General Thoresby's highly unethical behavior.

"But look here, Strangeways. You say he as good as told you that he wanted to provoke a libel action I never heard of such a thing! I shall instruct our lawyers to take it up."

"There was no other witness when he said it. He could deny saying it in court. It'd be my word against his."

"He seems to have the best motive of all for fiddling with the proof," said Liz.

"Yes. But he couldn't have done it himself. And can you imagine Protheroe, or Ryle, or the printer accepting a bribe from him to do it? Besides, he told me he was not guilty, and I believe him."

There was a brief silence; then Liz said, "So we come back to Miss Miles, or her son, or Stephen. . . . You've no other candidates?" she added, when Nigel did not reply.

Nigel had one other, but he was not prepared to talk about him yet. "No," he said. "Let's see if anything comes out of the fingerprint tests first."

"And if nothing comes?"

"Then I'd advise you to drop the investigation I could spend days or weeks, and a great deal of your money, digging into the past to find some link between Protheroe and Miss Miles. But would it be worth your while?"

"I don't like digging things up. You never know what you may find," said Liz in her forthright way "You might discover that Arthur had kept a brothel and Millicent was one of its inmates."

Geraldine's large pink face went pinker. "Really, Liz, you have an atrocious mind Now, how do we set about this fingerprinting business?"

They discussed the procedure for a little; then Nigel went home to fetch his apparatus. After lunch he took the prints of the partners, Protheroe, and two members of the staff through whose hands the proof had passed. None of these raised any objection; nor did Mr. Bates, General Thoresby, and the manager of the printing works, when Liz Wenham explained to them over the telephone that it was to be done simply for the purpose of elimination. These, too, Nigel visited in turn; and by six o'clock he had taken complete sets of fingerprints from all concerned. It was understood that he would not

be returning to the office till after the weekend, since the tedious task of bringing up latent prints on the 250-odd pages of *Time to Fight* and comparing them with the specimens he had obtained would take him the best part of two days.

He worked till midnight that day, with powdered graphite, insufflator and magnifying lens. He tested first the pages containing the libelous passages, which yielded him, amidst many blurred, indecipherable prints, a few he could identify as General Thoresby's, Stephen Protheroe's, Basil Ryle's and the compositor's He worked all Friday, till teatime, at the thankless task, thinking sourly that this was the sort of routine job which ought to be done by the police. He had reached page 200 by four o'clock, and got nothing for his pains but a blinding headache and a conviction that he had a cold coming He rang Clare Massinger.

"It's Nigel. I'm in a foul temper. Can I come to tea?"

"All right. Buy a Madeira cake on the way, will you?"

Five minutes later he was in Clare's studio. Gazing at a clay head on a stand, she did not look up for a few moments after he had entered: he had time to admire yet again the incredibly lustrous black hair that tumbled over her shoulders, the pale exquisite face in profile. Clare muttered malevolently at the head, then came over to Nigel.

"I won't kiss you," he said. "I think I'm getting a cold."

"I like your colds." Then, standing back from him, eying him with the same detached, concentrated look she gave her sitters, Clare said, "Yes, you do look rather disintegrated. I suppose you've been going about in wet socks again."

"Don't be a scold."

"You'd better have two aspirins with your tea. And take some nose drops in case your sinus starts playing up." She rummaged in a cupboard that appeared to be full of paint rags, producing a small green bottle with a syringe in it. "No, not that way. Lie down on the divan, hang your head backward over the edge like Desdemona after she's suffocated, and squirt it up your nostrils. The stuff won't get to your sinus unless you're upside down. No! Not a whole syringeful—just a few drops Why won't you ever do things by halves?"

His head dangling over the divan's edge, Nigel reflected that there are few more agreeable experiences than being bullied by a beautiful woman. Sitting up again, he told her so.

"I'm not bullying," she said. "I just don't want to have you on my hands moaning about oh your poor head."

As Clare got the tea ready, Nigel looked round the studio. My home-

from-home—and what a pigsty I could never cohabit with a woman who keeps an open pot of foie gras on a shelf next to an open tin of turpentine. Cooking utensils, plaster casts, half-finished cigarettes, valuable books of reproductions, gobbets of clay were littered everywhere. A clay-stained smock hung on a hook beside a superb, violet-colored Dior coat. A shelf running the length of one wall held a herd of those small, stylized clay horses, with hoselike muzzles, which Clare molded almost automatically while her mind was at work on other things. On a pedestal in one corner stood her acknowledged masterpiece—the bronze head of a boy, peaky and perky, the lips shaped as if he was about to whistle a tune or utter some blistering and unprintable repartee. It was the head of the boy Foxy, who had come into their lives so unceremoniously sixteen months ago, during the events which had led up to a melodramatic scene in the Albert Hall.

"Foxy wears well."

"Yes. He dropped in to tea yesterday Asked after the Guvnor. I told him you were busy detecting. Oh hell, I wish I could detect the cake knife."

"It's in the second drawer of your make-up table, in the bedroom."

"*Is* it? How did it get there? . . . Oh, you're mocking me!"

Clare, who had been prowling the studio in search of the cake knife, swirled round, and accidentally jogged Nigel's tea-cup out of his hand.

"Oh damn it all, *why* am I so clumsy!" she wailed, picking up the cup and mopping Nigel with the scarf she had taken off her neck.

"You're not. You're extremely graceful It's just your impulsive nature coming out that makes you bump into things."

After tea, Nigel lay on the divan with his head in Clare's lap. Her fingers stroked and molded his temples, he felt like a piece of clay being brought to life. Her hands were square, stubby-fingered, strong but also meltingly soft Nigel kissed one of them.

"They're ugly, aren't they?" she said "That's why I take so much trouble over them."

"I wish I was ugly, then."

"Oh, you are Hideous. In an interesting way Your face is lopsided But symmetry is boring. Do you feel better now?"

"Much better."

"Sometimes I wonder why I don't marry you," said Clare dreamily. "At any rate, it's not for want of not being asked "

"Or not asking."

"Well, will you?"

"I couldn't live in this sort of chaos, darling Clare. I should go mad."

Her dark eyes widened "But I'm not asking you to *cohabit* with me. I

don't think that would suit me at all. I wouldn't want you about the place all the time, tidying things up. I said 'marry.' You see, I like my chaos."

"Chaos is a necessary condition of creation for you?"

Clare nodded, and the coal-black hair danced over his face. "Pompous old bastard," she lovingly murmured.

"Shall I tell you all about my case?" said Nigel presently.

"I should like that very much."

Nigel removed himself to an armchair, and having shifted from its seat a large ammonite, an ash tray and a half-eaten bun, sat down. He then told her, in very considerable detail, about the libel affair at Wenham & Geraldine's. Clare listened intently, curled up like a cat on the divan, her eyes regarding him unwinkingly, like a cat's.

"Well, I call that very interesting, in a quiet way," she said when he had finished. "I don't like the sound of that Basil Ryle much."

Nigel glanced at her alertly. It was odd she should have picked out the suspect he had not mentioned to the other partners this morning.

"I think he is riding for a fall," she continued.

"Why?"

"You say he's in love with this Miles woman. I happen to know that she's bitch-bitch number one."

"You *know* her?"

"Know of. The Miles woman has one constant, enduring passion, one soulmate—Millicent Miles. She will have been keeping this Ryle on a string. If he fails to get the firm to reprint her books, she will cut the string. If he succeeds, she'll have got what she wants out of him, so she'll let go of the string. Either way, he's had it, you mark my words."

"Well, I must say, Clare, sometimes you amaze me."

"What? Am I wrong?"

"No, I'm sure you're right."

"And this Ryle sounds to me an explosive character. I suppose he's repressed and old-fashioned under his chromium plating, and nourishes rather shoddy-glamorous-chivalrous notions about sex and is half annoyed at himself for it?"

"How long have you known him?"

"Never met him in my life, or heard about him till you told me. Honestly."

Nigel rose and started to pace the studio. "Suppose Millicent Miles has made it a condition of marrying or going to bed with him that her books get reprinted. Protheroe is the main obstacle to this. So Ryle has an exceedingly strong motive for discrediting Protheroe, quite apart from his general feel-

ing that Stephen's a back number—like Bates, the late Production Manager —and ought to get the push."

"Oh, I don't think Ryle did it," said Clare.

"Why not?"

"He's been in the firm long enough to know that this Protheroe was the pomme of their yeux. They'd never sack him just on suspicion. No, I think Protheroe did it."

"But really, Clare—"

"Yes, I know. Fouling his own nest, and all that. But he sounds a bit mad, from your description. Anyone would be, reading books all day for twenty-five years. You'd lose touch with what they call reality, wouldn't you? I expect M. Miles egged him on to do it. All this quarreling they put on in public—it doesn't ring true to me, except as camouflage."

"Why should she egg him on?"

"Or perhaps she blackmailed him into it."

"Why?"

"To spite the General. Or the other General—the one who's bringing the libel action. I'm sure she's a vindictive woman. Perhaps the other General—"

"Blair-Chatterley."

"—perhaps he's the man who seduced her when she was a pure young maiden, if ever she was, which I very much doubt. the mystery man Ryle mentioned to you So when she came out with that word 'holocaust,' she and Protheroe were really gloating. Perhaps the child she had by Blair-Chatterley was one of the chaps who perished in the holocaust. Revenge motive, see?"

"It was stillborn. You're raving, my dear girl But as you're interested, you'd better do some research for me. You said you know *of* Miss Miles—"

"Yes. A woman who sat for me last year knew her—some time ago, though."

"The longer ago the better Find out from this woman—no, why not go straight to the horse's mouth? Invite Millicent Miles to sit for you She's vain enough to accept."

"Oh, all right. If I must," said Clare dubiously.

But, as it turned out, the circumstances called for a death mask of Millicent Miles, not a portrait head At some time this very evening, perhaps while Nigel and Clare talked about her, she was having her throat cut

Millicent Miles was at work on what was destined to be an unfinished autobiography, when it happened. The blinds were down, the electric fire

was burning, the typewriter rattled away in the room at Wenham & Geraldine's, and on the table beside it the pile of typescript silted higher The frosted-glass window between this room and Stephen Protheroe's was closed, its square pane showing no light from the other side. Millicent glanced at it for a moment, screwing up her eyes against the smoke from her cigarette, she glanced at her watch, then fell to work again. Whatever her other faults, as a writer and as a human being, she had remarkable power of concentration—so remarkable, indeed, that when the door behind her opened she did not look round. Either she was too absorbed to hear the door open, or she expected a visitor.

The visitor, in a swift movement, closed the door and turned the key. He then—let us say "he," though for reasons which will become apparent later, the sex of the visitor might be open to question—he then laid a grip bag on the floor, and in the same action took a long pace which brought him directly behind Miss Miles' chair.

"Just a minute," she said, still not looking round. As last words, these were both undistinguished and unavailing. The visitor was not prepared to wait even a minute. His gloved right hand thrust round over her arms, which were stretched out toward the typewriter; and his right arm, clamping them to her body, tilted the chair back. At the same instant his gloved left hand stuffed a piece of cloth into the mouth as it opened to cry out, knocking the cigarette away in the process. The visitor then swiftly changed arms. His left one went round her arms and body, drawing the chair away from the desk and tilting it back still further, while his right hand dived into a pocket, whipped out a razor and opened it Her staring eyes hardly had time to change from astonishment to terror before the razor had done its work.

All this had taken no more than ten seconds. The visitor let the back of the chair gently down to the ground, took the dying woman under the armpits and dragged her body off the chair to a corner of the room, where he let it lie flat. She was still making gurgling sounds, so he thrust the cloth deeper into her mouth and throat. He then—and throughout, the visitor performed with the swiftness and precision of an actor who has rehearsed his stage moves to perfection—took a staple from his pocket, and with a heavy ebony ruler he had picked up from the table hammered one point into the frame of the sliding window, the other into its wooden surround. Four firm blows, and the window was fastened shut.

Next, the visitor removed his bloodstained gauntlet gloves; he took a clean pair from the bag, put them on, and sat down to the typewriter. Flicking out the sheet which was already there, he inserted a fresh one and

began to type A few minutes later, a door banged down the passage. The visitor took a deep breath, but continued typing as the feet approached the door. They passed it, hurrying. If there were other people moving about in the building further off, the typewriter drowned any noises they might be making

The visitor now took the sheet out of the machine, and turned to the pile of typescript on the table. Though his gloved hands made it difficult to sift the pages, he soon found what he wanted. Slipping out a certain page of Miss Miles' autobiography and crumpling it into his pocket, he substituted for it the one he had just written. He moved to get up, but as if on an afterthought glanced over a few sheets of the typescript which came before the one he had removed Something caught his eye, making him draw in his breath sharply. He reached for the eraser, examined it to see there was no blood on it, then carefully rubbed out whatever it was that had offended him. After looking through several more pages, he placed the pile of typescript face down on the table again.

He now lifted the typewriter and placed it on the floor, choosing a dry spot, near the body of Millicent Miles, who by this time was evidently dead. Raising each of her hands in turn, and wiping first the several fingers which had blood on them, he pressed the fingertips against the keys of the machine, then replaced it on the table, and reinserted the sheet he had originally taken out.

Throat-cutting is a messy procedure. There was a great deal of blood on Miss Miles' dress, and on the floor beside her, and in the middle of the room where she had been murdered. There was blood, too, on the forearms of the visitor's coat, and a few stains elsewhere received from its contact with the chair But the visitor, who had otherwise manifested so much forethought and care, did not take any great precaution against stepping in the pools of blood. He gave a last look round the room—a look which comprehended everything except the hideous gash in the victim's throat He tapped his pocket: the razor was there all right He took off the galoshes he was wearing, wrapped them in newspaper and put them into the bag. Finally, moving round the edge of the room where there was no blood, he levered out the staple from the sliding window and returned to the door

For a moment he stood there, listening intently; glanced at his watch—he had been in the room for a little more than fifteen minutes Taking up the bag, which appeared to weigh heavy for its size, he turned out the light, unlocked the door, and was in the passage. Locking the door from the outside and pocketing the key, the visitor walked down the dim-lit passage toward the lift.

VII *QUERY*

Nigel Strangeways arrived at Angel Street at 9.30 on the Monday morning, his cold in full flood. He had discovered no unauthorized fingerprints on the proof of *Time to Fight;* and however fascinating might be an investigation into Millicent Miles' past, he felt sure the partners would not spend money on it. The case was over, for him. The trail had gone cold months ago, and it would never be possible to prove who had let Wenham & Geraldine in for this disastrous libel action, however strong his suspicions might be. Of material evidence there was none.

Entering the reception room, he noticed Miriam Sanders looking worried.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Worry melted her hostility for a moment. "It's the key," she replied, glancing down at her desk and up again.

"What key?"

"The key of the room Miss Miles is using. The cleaners left a message to say they couldn't get in there this morning The door was locked."

"Well, I expect she took it home by mistake. Why not ring her up?"

"I did But she's not at home. The German maid sounded in rather a state—I couldn't make out what about—she's got hardly a word of English."

"It's not your worry."

"But Miss Miles is not supposed to take the key away without telling me."

Nigel dismissed the matter and went upstairs, wondering vaguely why Miss Sanders was fussing. Stephen Protheroe was already at his desk. They discussed their weekends—Nigel nursing a cold at home, Stephen visiting friends in Hampshire—for a few minutes. Arthur Geraldine came in.

"Did Miss Miles say if she was coming back today?"

Protheroe shook his head.

"Apparently she's locked her room and taken away the key. It's a damned nuisance. I told her on Friday morning we needed the room for other purposes."

Stephen sniffed. "Typical! If she can't have the room herself, she'll see to it that we can't use it."

"But surely there's a spare key?" Nigel asked.

"It's been mislaid. I've sent for a locksmith to open the door."

"Well, that's all right then, isn't it?"

But Arthur Geraldine remained, oddly irresolute, gazing out of the window, then at a calendar on the wall, till Stephen remarked irritably, "If you want to know whether she's coming back, look and see if she's left her typescript on the table."

"But we can't get in, I've just told you. . . . Oh, I'd forgotten the sliding window."

Arthur Geraldine, emanating a queer uneasiness, grasped the knob resolutely, as if it were a nettle, and after a moment's hesitation pulled the window open.

"Yes, the typescript's— My *God,* she's there! On the floor!"

Nigel had to shoulder Geraldine away from the window—he seemed frozen to the spectacle within. Though the blinds were down in that room, enough light came through them and the sliding window to show the body lying in the far left-hand corner: Nigel made way for Stephen Protheroe, who exclaimed, his voice rising to a squawk,

"She's cut her throat!"

Arthur Geraldine was muttering in a distraught way, "I knew there was something wrong, I *knew* there was something wrong." His face trembled like a pink jelly.

"How could you possibly know?" Stephen sounded irritable again.

"I've been feeling uneasy all the morning. Must be my Irish blood."

Stephen was now positively exasperated. "I suppose you heard a banshee in the night too."

Nigel was at the telephone. Presently he put down the receiver. "Scotland Yard are sending a team and a police doctor. Mr. Geraldine, will you instruct someone to be waiting for them. And tell Miss Wenham what has happened. I'll tell Ryle myself."

"But we can't just leave the poor creature there"

"No one must enter that room till the police come She's dead. There's nothing you can do about her."

Geraldine plunged out of the room. Nigel rang Basil Ryle on the internal telephone "Would you come up to Protheroe's room? Yes, it's urgent." Nigel turned to Stephen "Let me do the announcing, please."

Basil Ryle looked strained and gummy-eyed, as if he had not slept. His voice had the sandpaper rasp of exhaustion. "What's the matter now?" he asked.

Nigel motioned him to the sliding window. With a puzzled expression,

Ryle approached it and looked through. He was quite still for a moment, then his head bowed down slowly till the forehead rested on the window ledge, as if in prayer.

"No! No! Millicent! No! No!" The almost inaudible gabble trailed away, and Basil Ryle slipped sideways to the floor.

"Well, I must say," Stephen began to protest.

Nigel glanced up from loosening Ryle's tie and collar. "What time did you leave here on Friday?"

Protheroe's face seemed to diminish; the lips pushed in and out.

"Are you completely inhuman?" he said.

"It's the first question the police will ask you. Keep the answer for them, if you prefer."

"Soon after 5:15, I think. I had a train to catch."

"And was Miss Miles in there when you left?"

"Yes. Typing her book, though, not cutting her throat."

Basil Ryle moaned, as if in comment on Stephen's edgy remark; his eyes opened and he sat up, shaking his head "What on earth? . . . Did I faint?" Then, as full consciousness returned, his face settled back into an expression of strained, drained misery, and he struggled to get up.

"It's no good, boy," said Stephen with unusual gentleness. "You can't do anything. She's dead."

Ryle stared at him. "I'm sorry," he said at last; and it was likely that he referred, not to Millicent's death, but to his own past attitude toward Stephen Protheroe.

"There *is* something you could do," said Nigel. "Run downstairs and ask Miriam Sanders for the key—"

"But the key's gone," Stephen said. "No, of course, she must have locked herself in. But—"

"If you'll look through that window again, you'll see that the key's not in the door. Of course, she might have locked the door and put the key somewhere else in the room. But I didn't mean *that* key."

"Have you any idea what you do mean?"

"The spare key of the side door into the street. The receptionist keeps it. I'd like to see it, please."

Basil Ryle went off on his errand. Nigel anticipated another protest from Stephen: "No. It's best to give him something to do. The office is closed from Friday evening to Monday morning?"

"Yes."

"No one here at all? Ever?"

"No Well, of course Arthur has a flat on the top floor. You know that."

"And what about Friday evenings? Staff leave at the same time as other weekdays?"

"Yes. Some at five, the rest at five-thirty."

"Except those doing overtime?"

"No We've a strict rule there should be no overtime on Friday evenings. The partners often leave earlier than usual on Fridays too."

The telephone rang It was Basil Ryle. Miss Sanders could not find the key of the side door. It was not in the drawer where she normally kept it, nor in any other drawer.

"Ask her when she remembers seeing it last."

"Thursday morning, apparently."

"Thank you. You didn't borrow it yourself? No Would you please ask the other partners if either of them did?" Nigel put down the receiver. "That's something else missing. Probably in Miss Miles' handbag, though."

"Something *else?*" asked Protheroe.

"Yes. The other thing is the razor."

"The razor?"

"Or whatever she cut her throat with. It's not in her hand. And I don't see it lying beside her. Ah well, we shall know soon enough."

Stephen's fine eyes regarded Nigel steadily. "You mean, whether it was suicide?"

"Exactly."

Nigel took up the telephone again, and had himself put through to Millicent Miles' house. After a conversation with her maid in German, he told Protheroe, "She didn't go home on Friday evening, though she'd ordered dinner. The maid was not particularly surprised—her employer often altered arrangements without letting her know· she assumed Miss Miles had gone off for the weekend She tried to get in touch with Cyprian Gleed, on Sunday, but failed."

"So you think it happened on Friday evening?"

"Looks like it. But there's no knowing yet."

A tramping of feet on the staircase Nigel went out. Arthur Geraldine was leading a party of C.I.D. men headed by the saturnine Inspector Wright, who had recently been transferred from Division to H Q , and the police surgeon Wright raised his eyebrows at Nigel, but gave no other sign of recognition. Geraldine made the introductions.

"I expect you'll want a room to—er—work in Interviews and so forth," he said. "You'd better have the reference library. Second door on the right."

"That's very good of you, sir I won't keep you from your work any longer, then." Wright glanced at his Detective Sergeant, pointed at Miss

Miles' door, and made a turning movement with his other hand. The man took out a bunch of skeleton keys.

"I wonder could you spare us a few minutes downstairs, Mr. Strangeways?" Geraldine's courtly manner struck a queer note under the circumstances. "If there's anything else you should require, Inspector, ring extension 4. That's my number."

Nigel waited behind for a word with Wright. As they talked, the Sergeant got the door of the room open. A breath of very warm, unpleasantly stuffy air came out. The electric fire had been burning there all the weekend.

Downstairs, in the senior partner's room, Nigel found a replica of the scene which had met his eyes on his first visit, five days ago: Geraldine at the desk, Liz Wenham leaning against the window, and Basil Ryle jingling the coins in his pocket on the other side of the desk. They might have been arrested eternally in a conversation-piece grouping—three publishers discussing the spring list or a reprint order or some author's witless objections to his blurb.

"This is a terrible business, Strangeways," said Arthur Geraldine. "Why should she do it? Why?" And within the sacred precincts of Wenham & Geraldine, his scandalized face visibly added.

"It's by no means certain she did do it."

At the window, standing very still, her rosy-apple cheeks looking blotched now, Liz Wenham said, "You mean, it could have been—" the word "murder" was too much for her—"could have been done by somebody else?"

Nigel nodded. He noticed Ryle flinching. Geraldine buried his bald head in his hands.

"First the libel trouble, now this," he muttered

"Oh, come, Arthur. That's just coincidence " Liz Wenham was trying to be her brisk self. Coincidence, thought Nigel: what about coincidence now?

"She'd never do it. Not Millicent " Basil Ryle's tone was a strange mixture of agony and exasperation. Liz gave him a disapproving glance She is shocked by naked emotion, thought Nigel, in business hours, at any rate, keeps her life in compartments. He realized he had no conception what went on in her other, private compartment.

"I suppose we ought to get in touch with her relatives," Liz was saying. "Is Cyprian Gleed the next of kin?"

The telephone rang. Geraldine gave them a rueful look, and became involved in a conversation with the caller about a print order. Drawing Nigel aside, Liz Wenham said, "We must have your help over this. Your professional services, I mean Will you stay on for a while?"

"Of course, if you want me to. But I'm afraid we're at a dead end with the libel business. Unless it's connected—"

"Basil. Do you know Gleed's number? Ring him up, like a good chap," said Liz.

Ryle stared at her intently, as if trying to understand a foreigner, then walked out of the room like an automaton. A secretary came in with a message for Liz.

"Tell her I've got to cancel lunch today. I'll ring her back. Oh, and, Laura, ring Clausson and tell him he's not got that second color right yet on the Bellington jacket. it's still too muddy."

"Yes, Miss Wenham." The girl tiptoed away, solemn as a communicant. Rumor of Miss Miles' decease was already going the rounds

Liz Wenham pushed back the gray hair over her temple. "Business as usual. Or do you think we ought to close down the office for today?"

"No. The police will want to interview your staff."

Arthur Geraldine laid down the receiver, took out a large silk handkerchief and mopped his face.

"What were we saying?"

"I've asked Basil to ring Miss Miles' son. And Mr. Strangeways is going to stand by for a bit."

"Oh, good. I hope Basil will be tactful. It'll be a terrible shock for—"

"Shock treatment is what that young man needs. Let in a bit of reality Ruined by his mother, of course."

"Ah, come now, Liz."

"Don't be sanctimonious, Arthur. She was a poisonous woman, and you know it."

Geraldine gave her a strange look, then plied his handkerchief again as if to wipe the expression off his face. "Extraordinary the way one's mind works I can't help thinking how this will put up the advance sales for the Miles autobiography. I'm afraid you must be getting a very low view of publishers, Strangeways. We're all monomaniacs, you know."

Nigel's polite murmur was drowned by an edgy laugh from Liz Wenham. "But even a publisher won't arrange an author's death just for publicity purposes, so you needn't look so anxious, Arthur."

"Liz, that's no way to be talking. You don't seem to realize—"

The door opened and Basil Ryle came in "Well, I've told him. He sounded as if I'd waked him from a weekend hangover."

"Is he coming along?"

"I said there was no need to yet."

"Did you ask him when he'd seen his mother last?" inquired Nigel.

"Seen his mother last?" Ryle vaguely repeated, his eyes wincing. "No. No, why should I? I'm not a policeman."

"Well, there's no use standing about talking." Liz Wenham's voice was brisk. "I'm going to do some work. We'd better get down to that leaflet for the Hosking memoirs, Basil."

"For God's sake!"

"Come along We can't have you going broody." There was compassion beneath the roughness of her tone Basil followed her out meekly, his feet dragging.

"I've got to ring our solicitors," said Geraldine. "Any news?"

"No. I'm afraid it's a washout."

"Well, I'm sure you've done your best."

"I daresay if we put in some heavy research—"

"Research?"

"Yes. I've a hunch that the secret of this libel business could be found, if we dug deep enough. We'd find it buried somewhere in the past"

Arthur Geraldine raised his hand from the wrist, where it lay on the desk. "I don't think we'd better go stirring up any more mud, Strangeways. Not in view of what has just happened." The senior partner's voice was courtly but firm—the voice of Wenham & Geraldine regretfully declining to make an offer for an author's manuscript.

Nigel went upstairs to Stephen Protheroe's room Stephen was concentrated upon a typescript, undistracted apparently by the voices and shufflings in the next room, the flash bulbs that lit up the frosted glass of the sliding window from time to time.

"How long does this go on for?" he asked, without looking up.

"All depends. A few hours, at least."

"And then?"

"They'll take the body away for the post-mortem and start interviewing everyone."

Stephen made a pencil mark on the page before him. Then, in a resonant, thrilling voice that came oddly from so minnowy a man, said:

> "The bustle in a house
> The morning after death
> Is solemnest of industries
> Enacted upon earth."

"Yes," said Nigel. "But it goes on about 'putting love away,' doesn't it? Not so appropriate."

After a pause, Stephen murmured, as if talking to himself, "What *was*

her attraction? Horse teeth A laugh like a football fan's rattle. Mouth too big, heart too small. Yet she could get any man she wanted—any man. I suppose all-of-a-pieceness was her strength: the seamless garment of egotism; like a child's egotism—yes, there *was* something innocent about it. And innocence can be the most unscrupulous, destructive thing in the world. Of course, she had vitality too. Incredible vitality. That's the flame every moth goes for."

"I imagine her as rather a tomboy when she was young."

"Tomboy? M'm, yes, you may be right."

"Which doesn't fit in with her own picture of herself as a downtrodden sensitive at the mercy of a drunken father and a sluttish mother."

"*What?* Did she tell you that? No—" Stephen looked suddenly alive with intelligence—"no, that's the sort of romance she'd spin to catch some chivalrous, unsophisticated youngster, God help him."

"Her parents weren't—?"

"For all I know, they may have been fiends in human form. But I bet she gives a rather different account of them in her autobiography. Of course, she knew her market. The Millicent Miles fans would be terribly shocked if she undressed her dead parents in public."

"You've read the book?"

"I was tempted to take a peek at it, compare the actual Miles with the so-to-speak presentation copy. But I— What the hell—?"

Protheroe gave a start as the sliding window was flung open and Inspector Wright's sallow, sharp face looked through. Nigel introduced them.

"You normally occupy this room, sir?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me when this window was nailed up?"

"Nailed up? How do you mean? It's never been nailed up as far as I know." Stephen sounded quite annoyed.

"When did you last have it open, sir—before today, I mean?"

"Good lord, how should I remember? Friday afternoon, probably. Yes, I think Miss Miles opened it to have a word with me sometime in the afternoon."

"And, of course, you'd have noticed the sound of hammering, if it'd been done while you were still here."

"I imagine so."

"And you left the office on Friday at—?"

"Soon after 5:15."

"I'm much obliged to you, sir." Inspector Wright gave a little sideways jerk of his head at Nigel, who at once went into the next room. It seemed to

be filled with bodies, apart from the one lying on the floor, covered now with a macintosh—plain-clothes men, each going about his task, separate and preoccupied, like people playing treasure hunt at a party The blinds were up, and the window open it was difficult to keep one's eyes off the blood patches on the floor, glistening and rust red.

Inspector Wright drew a forefinger across his throat, from ear to ear. "Murder No weapon. Door key gone. We'll have a talk presently, Mr. Strangeways. Just take a look at these marks; they're recently made." He indicated two holes in the frame and surround of the sliding window. "Staple driven in to fasten the window shut, looks like. Why?"

Nigel was not unaccustomed to Wright's habit of keeping his subordinates on their toes in this pedagogic manner—asking them to explain what was already clear to him.

"To prevent anyone looking in while the murder was being committed," he replied.

"Yes?" The Inspector's dark, piercing eyes were still expectant; his fingers beat a tattoo on the air.

"Which suggests," Nigel equably continued, "that the murder was committed *either* on Friday evening, after Protheroe had left but while there could still be other people in the building, *or* was committed during the weekend and the staple driven in to make you think it had been done on Friday evening."

"Not bad But have you considered why the staple should have been removed at all after it had served its purpose?"

"You tell me—it's your turn, mate."

"Assuming the murderer assumes we would not notice the marks it left, or wouldn't bother about them, it'd give him a pretty alibi. Who'd ever kill the woman, with other people still in the building, liable to walk into the next room and take a look through the window? That's how he wanted us to think. Therefore, we're meant to say, it must have been done over the weekend, which no doubt he spent a long way from here. Right?"

"Possible. But there could be another explanation. How long d'you take to walk into this room and cut a woman's throat? A few seconds, if you take her by surprise You don't, presumably, staple the window first. But why do it afterward, unless you want to stay in the room for a while unobserved? And why should you want to do that, unless you're going to get rid of some real evidence or plant some fake evidence?"

Wright nodded vigorously. "O.K. in theory But all we've found so far is a few footprints in the bloodstains. Galoshes probably. Size 10. Quite smart." He made a flapping motion with one hand. "Wear a pair several

sizes too big Fox the police—poor dumb clucks. Then whip 'em off They'd wash easily too."

"When did she die?"

"You know these medicos. Not less than thirty-six hours ago. Not more than three days. Helpful. Wait for the P.M., my lad."

"She didn't go home on Friday evening. And she hasn't been there since. I—"

"Keep it, Mr. Strangeways. We'll have a proper chat soon. Going back to those staple marks— Yes, what is it, Summers?"

The Inspector was drawn aside by one of his men. Nigel took the opportunity to inspect the table where the dead woman had worked. The pile of typescript was still there, and a sheet in the machine. Millicent Miles' career had been ended, it seemed, in mid-sentence. Nigel bent closer, something catching his eye.

"Wright, have you finished with this machine?"

"It's all yours."

The door opened Men came in with a stretcher. After the body had been lifted onto it and carried down to the ambulance, Nigel did a little typing; then he beckoned to the Inspector.

"See? That's where she left off typing. And that's where I began. It's out of alignment."

Wright's eyes sparked with intelligence. "Someone took out the sheet of paper, then put it back later? She could have done it herself, mind you."

"She *could* have. If she didn't, the murderer had some typing to do himself Thats what he needed time for. That's why he stapled the window. Now *why* did he have to use a typewriter?"

VIII *LOWER CASE*

Late that night, on Nigel's invitation, Inspector Wright was supping with him at Boulestin's. It was a silent meal, for both men were reading. Nigel had spent the afternoon, while Wright and his detective-sergeant were interviewing members of the firm, in typing out a full account of his investigation of the libel affair. It was this that the Inspector was now reading, as he wolfed a delicate saddle of hare and Nigel studied the results of the police interviews.

From the latter, it was evident that Wright had thrown his net over the period between 4 P M and midnight on Friday. At about four, according to the girl on the switchboard, Miss Miles had put through a telephone call; the police had checked this call—it was to her hairdresser. Stephen Protheroe was vague as to when she had opened the window for a word with him—thought it would have been about 4:30 but couldn't be sure; so it was safer to assume 4 P M. as the last time when she was known to be alive. Inquiry into Miss Miles' habits showed that she normally left Wenham & Geraldine at about 6 P.M.; but occasionally, according to her German maid, she had worked later, not returning home sometimes till 8 o'clock. However, unless she had made an appointment with the murderer for a meeting in the office late that night (and why at the office if it was to be so late?), the natural deduction was that she must have been killed before 6 P.M. The murderer would hardly have based his plans on the chance that he would find her still at work later than this Beside, the clue of the staple marks pointed to a period when there were still people in the office and the murderer might be spotted with the body.

There was one other time pointer in Inspector Wright's report. He had interviewed Susan, the forward blonde of the Reference Library. Susan had heard no suspicious sounds from the next-door room that Friday afternoon; leaving at 5:30 sharp, she had heard "Miss Miles typing away like mad," as she passed her door. Now this meant either that Miss Miles was still alive then, or that she had just been killed and it was the murderer whom Susan heard typing Wright's investigation concentrated, therefore, on the period from 5·15 to 6 P.M Inevitably, given these facts, it must, but to concentrate thus, Nigel reflected, was to ignore the problem of the missing key—the spare key to the side door, which had last been seen by Miriam Sanders on

Thursday morning. This key was not found in the dead woman's possession. It must have been "borrowed" by somebody else. Why borrow it except to get into the office after the main door was locked at 5:30? The partners and Stephen Protheroe each possessed a side-door key, so could have no reason for abstracting the spare one except to divert suspicion onto an outsider or some member of the staff.

Withdrawing his mind from these speculations, Nigel applied it again to the evidence. The movements of the people in whom he was particularly interested were briefly as follows:

Arthur Geraldine. 4–5.50, in his room; 5–5 15, dictating letters (confirmed by secretary), 5.15–5·18, brief chat with S. Protheroe, 5 50, went upstairs to flat (confirmed by Mrs. Geraldine, who said that her husband was with her for the rest of the evening).

Elizabeth Wenham. 4–5.15, in her room, 5 10–5 15, discussing business with Basil Ryle, 5.15–5 20, in studio (confirmed), 5 20–5.30, in her room, 5 30, left office (confirmed by M. Sanders), 6·00, cocktail party, Chelsea (confirmed); 7 30, arrived home (confirmed by maid), dined alone, read a book, to bed at 11.

Basil Ryle. 4–5, out of office, giving talk at Book Fair; 5:10, returned to office (confirmed by M Sanders); 5:10–5:15, discussing business with E. Wenham; 5.15–6 00, working in room (confirmed by secretary for period 5 15–5 25), 6 00, to Festival Hall for dinner, then concert (not yet confirmed); 10 25, returned home

Stephen Protheroe. 4–5·15, reading; 5 15, a few minutes' chat with A Geraldine (confirmed), then left building at 5 20 (confirmed by M. Sanders) and walked to Waterloo Station via Hungerford Bridge; caught 6·05 Southern Electric to Pennshill, Hants; 7 30, met by friends at Pennshill Station (not yet confirmed).

The immense task of interviewing the Wenham & Geraldine staff individually had, of course, not been covered today. After he had interviewed the principals, Inspector Wright and his sergeant, conducted by Basil Ryle, went the rounds of each department, asking the employees only if they had seen or heard anything suspicious on Friday evening. The result was a complete blank Miriam Sanders declared that no unauthorized visitor had come to the building between 4 P.M. and 5:30, when she locked up A considerable number of the employees—those who clocked out at 5 P.M.—could probably be dismissed from the reckoning; but there still remained some thirty of them, apart from the principals, whose movements would have to be given a routine check.

Police were still searching the building for the weapon and any blood-

stained clothes that might have been hidden there. The murderer must have got a good deal of blood over himself, and it seemed unlikely he would walk out of the office in such a condition.

The weapon, thought Nigel A razor. Which of the people who had a motive for killing her would use a razor? Such a primitive sort of weapon, so unlike the highly civilized persons who controlled the fortunes of Wenham & Geraldine. Of course, there's always Cyprian Gleed He found he had said it aloud.

"Yes," repeated Inspector Wright, looking up from Nigel's report, "there's always him. I sent a man to interview him this afternoon. Seems this Gleed was alone in his flat from 4:30 till 7 on Friday, then went out on a bender. Lives by himself over a shop in W.8, private door on street, no corroboration. Not very co-operative, my chap reported." The Inspector sketched an epicene gesture. "Cyprian Gleed! Sounds as if he'd walked out of Wilde or Firbank. Miss Miles, now—was she a touch typist, d'you know, or the old two-finger-exercise stuff?"

"How you dart about! I never *saw* her at work; but it sounded rapid and fluent enough to be touch typing Why?"

"Just got a report from the fingerprint boys before I came along here. Only her prints on that typewriter. Prints of all ten fingers on the keys"

Inspector Wright danced his own fingers on the table, glancing cannily at Nigel

"But?"

"But the murderer was not conversant with the touch-typing system"

"Sorry, my head's not too good just now."

"The fingerprints are on the wrong keys, if you get me. He must have pressed her fingers on them regardless, after she was dead Cold-blooded character."

"*And* after he'd finished his own bit of typing. It's another proof that he did some, isn't it? And that he doesn't want us to know he did?"

"Looks like it."

"Of course, she might have invented a touch-typing system of her own"

"Love making difficulties, don't you? The Oxford mentality. Cheers." Wright drained his glass of Richebourg, and began collecting his papers "I'm going to sort out young Cyprian tomorrow morning. You'd better come as my bodyguard. I'll pick you up at 9:15 And thank you for my nice dinner."

Nigel's first cigarette the next morning, after an early breakfast, started a paroxysm of coughing which set his sinus aching fiercely again He took

some nose drops and put the bottle in his pocket. Last time he had worked with Inspector Wright, he had been coshed silly; and now this stabbing pain over one eye. Wright is my jinx, he thought sourly. The prospect of reading through Miss Miles' autobiography, after the fingerprint experts had dealt with it, appalled him The secret of the crime very likely lay imbedded somewhere in its perfumed pages; but the possibility roused no enthusiasm in him. All he wanted was to crawl round to Clare's studio and go to sleep.

In the police car, he began to feel a little better. Inspector Wright's vitality was infectious. he could not imagine any state less active than his own, and this keyed you up when you were in his company.

The car stopped in front of an antique shop. Wright got out, followed by Nigel and a plain-clothes sergeant, and rang the bell of a door at the side of the shop window.

"You didn't tell me you were bringing an army," Cyprian Gleed remarked when, after some delay, he had answered the bell. He was in silk pajamas and a new, cardinal-red dressing gown with a monogram on the breast pocket—an outfit which threw his scruffiness into strong relief but indicated why he was chronically short of money He led them up a steep, narrow staircase to the top floor; the second floor, he explained, was crammed with the overflow from the antique shop

His sitting room was in a state of grotesque disorder, only equaled, in Nigel's experience, by that of Clare Massinger's studio But, whereas her untidiness had something functional about it, or at least was the result of a single-minded concentration upon essentials, the disorderliness here seemed almost pathological. An expensive radio was still playing a progressive-jazz record as they entered. Two golden hamsters scrabbled up the side of a basket chair. There were unwashed cups, plates and wine glasses everywhere; sheets of music on the floor; encyclopedia volumes on an elegant harpsichord in one corner; a dusty easel in another; a single ski and, rather oddly, a pair of boxing gloves hanging from a nail, in a third corner. An open door revealed the bedroom, an unmade bed with a woman's nightdress dangling from it, and a breakfast tray half concealed by a heap of clothes on the floor.

These fragments he has shored against his ruin, thought Nigel, feeling a little sorry for Millicent Miles' son. Inspector Wright had taken a chair on one side of the gas fire, which was protected by a high, old-fashioned nursery fireguard.

"I hope you will accept my sympathy, sir, in your bereavement," he formally but not perfunctorily began.

The young man's face twitched, then set into a contemptuous look. "We can dispense with the preliminaries. I don't like polite, meaningless words. My mother is no loss to me. She ruined my character—everyone will tell you that."

If it was intended to shock or otherwise impress the Inspector, Cyprian Gleed's speech fell remarkably flat. Wright, who had been gazing at him with the expression of a child seeing a new animal in the zoo, replied briskly, "Good. That'll save me a lot of trouble. You were here from 4:30 till 7 P.M. last Friday, I understand?"

"So I told your minion."

"And after that?"

"I couldn't wait about any longer. I was meeting some friends for dinner."

"You were expecting somebody who didn't turn up?"

"Yes. My mother."

Inspector Wright, who always contrived to look madly interested in the statements of those he was interviewing, had something to look interested about now

"What time ought she to have arrived?"

"After she'd finished work, the idea was: between 5:30 and 6:30."

"It was by arrangement?"

"Ça se dit." Cyprian Gleed turned to the plain-clothes man, who had stopped dead in his shorthand at this point, and translated, "That is obvious."

"When had the meeting been fixed?"

"By telephone. The previous afternoon. I rang her at Wenham & Geraldine, and asked her to look in on her way home the next day."

"Any special reason for asking her, sir?"

Gleed's white teeth gleamed behind the scrubby beard. "Of course there was. I never greatly cared to meet my mother socially."

"What was the purpose of this, er, appointment?"

"Money. I wanted her to dish out."

"But she'd just refused you. That very morning," Nigel put in.

"I fancied she would be more amenable later on."

"Why?"

"*Christ!* . . . I beg your pardon, sir." It was Wright's sergeant, upon whose notebook one of the hamsters had suddenly materialized. "Lumme, what *is* this? Shoo! Get off."

"Don't get excited, Fenton. It's a golden hamster. Give it one of your pencils to suck," suggested Inspector Wright.

But Fenton had already swept the animal off onto the floor, and the next moment he was defending himself against Cyprian Gleed, who had sprung at him, shouting, "You bloody, clumsy oaf!" and was scratching at his face like a woman. Nigel, who happened to be nearest, pinioned the young man's arms and deposited him in the chair from which he had leaped.

"Fenton," said Wright, winking at his subordinate, "no roughhousing here, please. And you must not be unkind to the animal creation. Hamsters are very pretty, inoffensive little beasts. Have you had these long, sir?"

Scowling, Gleed answered, "My mother always forced me to keep pets They're supposed to be good for maladjusted children. Substitute love-objects for the emotionally undernourished, if you see what I mean. Now I've got into the habit."

"I see." Wright stroked the back of the other hamster. "You were saying your mother would be more amenable later on. Why did you think so?"

"Ask Strangeways. Perhaps he has a theory."

I wonder why he dislikes me so much, thought Nigel. He decided to take up the challenge "You were going to apply pressure—going to say you saw her tampering with the proof copy of *Time to Fight?* Is that it?"

Cyprian sneered at him again. " 'Apply pressure'! That's just like your generation. Tying pretty ribbons round ugly truths. Why not say 'blackmail'?"

"If you prefer it," replied Nigel, rather nettled. "My generation doesn't make a virtue of boorishness."

"And *was* your intention to blackmail your mother?" Wright asked.

"That's Strangeways' theory."

The Inspector let it go. "You didn't think of ringing her up on Friday evening, when she was late for her appointment?"

"She was working at the publishers', and their switchboard closes down at 5:30."

"And after that—Saturday and Sunday?" Wright's alert, friendly, terrier-like expression was unaltered. "Since you needed money so badly, I assume you tried to get in touch with her over the weekend."

Cyprian grinned "Is this a pitfall that I see before me? I always need money badly. But it could wait—it wasn't all that urgent. Anyway, I was on a blind over the weekend. I started getting drunk at 7 P.M. on Friday I remained drunk till Sunday morning And from Sunday afternoon till Monday morning I was in bed with—or, as Strangeways would probably say, entertaining—a young lady."

"Miriam Sanders?" inquired Nigel.

"Correct."

"Do you benefit by your mother's will, sir, may I ask?"

"You may. I imagine so, but I don't know for certain. She detested me. On the other hand, she was a conventional-minded woman and would think that money should be left to one's flesh-and-blood." Cyprian Gleed screwed up one corner of his mouth. "And now, may *I* ask a question?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Have you, in the course of your career, come across any matricides?"

"Lord bless you, yes. Two or three. It's comparatively rare, though, I agree."

The young man seemed rather deflated by the Inspector's breezy reception of his query, and did not pursue the matter. Wright began taking names and addresses of people in whose company Gleed had spent the Friday night and Saturday. His sinus jabbing at him again, Nigel lay down on a settee and squirted nose drops up his left nostril, averting his eyes, after one glance, from a wash painting on the ceiling, which the artist had mercifully left unfinished, of a satyr at grips with a nymph. Perhaps I've underestimated young Gleed, he thought: he appears to have brains, and some courage—if his effrontery is a kind of courage and not just a product of living in a fantasy world. Sitting up, Nigel gazed round the fantastic room again, so deeply occupied with his own thoughts that, when Cyprian Gleed asked, "Well, do you like my flat?" he uttered without premeditation what was in his mind—

"It looks like a museum of false starts."

Cyprian's eyes rolled up and round, in that way reminiscent of his mother's mannerism, then they went dead, as he surveyed Nigel for a few seconds without speaking.

"Now, about the inquest, sir. You will be notified of it shortly. And the funeral arrangements—I daresay you would like your mother's executor to take them off your hands."

"Executor?" asked Cyprian dully. "What? Oh yes. For a moment I thought you'd said 'executioner.' "

Fenton, not for the first time, breathed heavily over his shorthand notes, his whole expression registering outrage and antipathy

"Had your mother any enemies, sir?"

"I wondered when we were coming to that. Dozens, I should think. If thoughts could kill, she must have borne a charmed life."

"But you've no reason to suspect anyone in particular? No threats, or—?"

"I tell you who had good *cause* to wring her neck. Basil Ryle She was playing him up. Love me, love my books. God! But I shouldn't think he knew it. Besotted ass!" The venomous disgust in Gleed's voice made even

Inspector Wright glance at him sharply. Oh dear, thought Nigel, this is Hamlet and his Mum all over again.

Further questions eliciting no more information about Ryle, or any other possible suspects, the three men left.

"Well," said Wright, when they were in the police car on the way to the dead woman's house in Chelsea, "what do we make of him?"

Fenton could contain himself no longer. "Downright immoral, I call it! Talking about his mother like that; and then what he was up to with his girl friend. Shameless little bastard!"

Nigel said, "I think he's rather pathetic."

"I think he's damned dangerous," Wright cut in. "I don't like engines rushing around without drivers. How clever is he, though? Clever enough to invent that story about blackmailing his mother?"

"Doesn't give him much of an alibi, sir," said Fenton.

"No. But a chap who expects to screw money out of his mother by threatening to expose her over that proof-copy affair—well, he wouldn't go cutting her throat till he was sure she wouldn't play. Is that how he wants us to reason?"

"I don't see him as a throat cutter," said Nigel. "He'd think up something more subtle and long distance."

"He acted violent enough just now," Fenton remarked.

"Yes, but that was off-the-cuff, my lad; and besides you'd been brutal to one of his dear little pets."

"Brutal! Well I—"

"Whereas the killing of Millicent Miles was a premeditated affair," Wright continued. "Why 'pathetic,' Mr. Strangeways?"

"Oh, that room! Full of things he's begun and never finished—pursuits he's taken up and dropped. Trying to prove to himself that he can do something really well, and invariably failing—do something except drink and cadge and seduce girls."

" 'A museum of false starts,' eh?"

"I'm sorry for the children of successful people. They so often don't inherit their parents' talent, or stamina, or whatever it is that has made them successful. But they desperately want to impress their parents, somehow or other."

"By cutting their throats, for instance?" said Fenton.

"Fenton, don't be crude," Wright snapped. "Sarcasm doesn't become you."

"No, sir. Beg pardon."

"Were you a problem child, Fenton?"

"No, sir."

"Never threw harmless animals around the room when you were a boy?"

"No, sir," replied Fenton in a repressed tone. Inspector Wright was popular with his subordinates; but, as they said, "you had to watch him"; his reactions were not always predictable, nor could you always be sure if he was pulling your leg or tearing you off a strip

Millicent Miles' house in Chelsea owed more to an interior decorator than to its late mistress. Of course, she had only been living here a few months; but the rooms held no personal flavor at all—they were like demonstration rooms in some exhibition of Gracious Living If they gave any other positive impression, it was that impression of unshared life which one often receives from the houses of widows, ex-mistresses or businesswomen

Nigel translated while Inspector Wright questioned Miss Miles' German maid. Hilda Langbaum, a stocky, flaxen-haired Fräulein, was at first frightened and over-obsequious, then—since the English police showed no inclination to bully her—grumbling, voluble, and rather malicious about her late employer. Miss Miles was not sympathetic. she had been by turns brusque and inquisitive; she kept everything locked up; she was erratic in her comings and goings, inconsiderate about household arrangements; she was insufficiently appreciative of Hilda Langbaum's excellent cooking; she used bad language.

Yes, Mr. Gleed had come to the house occasionally, but not during the last few weeks. No, her mistress had seemed her usual self when she left for the office on Friday morning. Men visitors? Yes, sometimes alone, sometimes for small dinner parties their names could be found in the engagement book, which was on Miss Miles' desk The most recent visitor had been Mr. Ryle; he arrived about 9.30 on Thursday night; Hilda did not know how long he had stayed—she herself went up to bed soon after 10. Had a Mr Protheroe been to the house? Not to Hilda's knowledge. Or any other members of the publishing firm? Mr. and Mrs Geraldine and Miss Wenham were invited to dinner in September, but had not visited the house since.

At this point Mr. Deakin, the dead woman's solicitor, arrived, by appointment, to examine her papers with Inspector Wright. The two men repaired to the study for this purpose. A key had been found in Miss Miles' handbag, which Hilda Langbaum identified as the key to the desk drawer in which her mistress had kept all the other keys. The Yale to the side door of Wenham and Geraldine's was not to be found in this drawer, however, and Fenton was sent to search the other rooms for it. The course of the investigation, Nigel realized, must depend considerably for the present upon

whether Millicent Miles or someone else had "borrowed" this key; if she had not done so herself, then it seemed probable that the murderer must have got hold of it; and why should he need it, except to enter the publishers' office after the main door had been locked at 5:30? The partners and Stephen Protheroe already possessed keys to the side door, which suggested that the murderer must be either some other member of the firm or an outsider conversant with its habits

Nigel mooched after Fenton for a few minutes, then returned to the study. Here Inspector Wright handed him a desk diary, indicating two recent entries: "R , 9.30 " was scribbled in last Thursday's space—that would be Basil Ryle's visit Friday showed a luncheon engagement, and below it the laconic entry "Thorsday?!" Nigel pondered on the question mark, the exclamation mark, and the revealing pun, as he drifted down to the basement kitchen.

Hilda Langbaum was making herself a cup of coffee, and Nigel accepted one too. The girl was clearly worried about her immediate future; Nigel told her he would arrange with the solicitor that she should receive wages up to the end of the month and be allowed to stay on in the house for a week or two, if she so wished, while looking around for another job. Her gratitude for this small kindness was excessive. Nigel drew her on to talk for a while about her home in Nuremberg Confidence being established, he led the conversation, via Hilda's fiancé whose photograph she showed him, to Basil Ryle. Hilda became at once sentimental and melodramatic. Such a good young man. So deeply in love. And the way she had treated him! A cold woman, a heartless, a mocker. A German lover would have beaten her, made her go down on her knees; but the Englishmen were soft; they did not understand that the man must be master, they ran away with their tails between their legs, like Mr Ryle the other night.

Hilda had not wished to speak of this to the police, but Mr. Strangeways was different, sympathetic.

"When I went upstairs to bed," said Hilda, encouraged to continue, "I heard their voices in the drawing room. I do not understand your language, but I could not help listening. She was lashing him with her tongue It was like a whip of ice He spoke little: he sounded bewildered, shocked, as if—as if an angel had suddenly spat in his face. He was pleading then, I think; but she laughed—oh, very ugly her laughter was. And the next minute that poor Mr. Ryle hurried from the room and ran downstairs out of the house He did not see me. He looked quite blind; and deathly white in the face, like a specter."

IX *INSERT*

That afternoon Nigel settled down with Millicent Miles' autobiography, which he had picked up at Scotland Yard when Inspector Wright had finished his work in the dead woman's house. The search there had brought no clues to light, unless the cryptic entry in her diary for Friday afternoon—"Thorsday?!"—could be called a clue. The solicitor having stated that he had drawn up no will for his client, and no will being found among her papers, there was a strong presumption that she had died intestate. Nigel hoped that the autobiography would be more revealing than the Chelsea house; indeed, he approached it with the liveliest interest. Millicent Miles had possessed one quality of the great writer—that negative capability which enables its possessor to take on the color of his environment, surrender himself to the personality of another. With her it was no more than a chameleon trick, and a trick which she had learned to exploit. But she had been one woman to the infatuated Basil Ryle, and a quite different woman to the sardonic Stephen Protheroe.

What was she to herself? Would the autobiography reveal the real woman behind this fluid personality, or would it offer only another illusion —a Millicent Miles cunningly adapted to the fantasies of her avid readers?

One thing was plain from the start: the reader would be taken into her confidence. She gave the effect of singling him out, drawing him aside, telling him things that were not for every ear. It was done with quite remarkable plausibility; and you had to keep your wits about you to perceive that this intimate address in fact disclosed far less than it appeared to. Her writing has the surface frankness of a mirror rather than the candor of transparent glass, thought Nigel As he read on, he began to realize that every incident, every person in the book was a mirror set at just the right angle to reflect its author most becomingly. When she confessed some childish peccadillo, she conveyed the impression of a high-spirited girl, a jolly, romping tomboy whose escapades one could not but view with a smile of indulgence. When she hinted, ever so delicately, at dissension in the home, one could almost hear the rustle as a not quite opaque veil was drawn over her parents' less agreeable aspects, how sensitive the poor child must have been, you were led to think; and how wonderful she is to bear no resentment for the way she must have suffered.

It really is a masterpiece of calculated dishonesty, Nigel reflected; but before long he changed his mind, judging that Millicent Miles, like every best-seller of her type, believed implicitly in every word she wrote, at any rate while she wrote it, and was sublimely unconscious of contradictions or self-deception. That she could combine this unawareness with so skillful a manipulation of the reader's responses argued a most subtle sleight-of-mind —an egotism and fundamental irresponsibility truly formidable.

Nigel wondered how Miss Miles had proposed to explain to Basil Ryle the discrepancies between the story of her adolescence, as she had told it to him, and as she related it in her book According to the book, though her father, a commission agent, had certainly gone bankrupt, he was neither a drunkard nor a sadist; she pictured him as a jovial, bumbling, fumbling character, whose sins were of omission rather than commission Nor was her mother represented here as a slut and a domestic tyrant; she was, instead, a strait-laced woman of the Baptist persuasion who had done no worse than nag her husband incessantly and fail to understand her daughter's girlish aspirations Nevertheless, though the treatment of these two in the early chapters was the reverse of satirical or denunciatory, an atmosphere of sweet forgiveness suspired from between the lines—a kind of holy hush which suggested that the author had had a good deal to hush up. Again, she had certainly got a job as shop assistant at the age of seventeen; but it was in a bookshop, and she did not run away from home to do so.

Nigel could hardly wait to get to Millicent Miles at nineteen, when—so she had told Basil Ryle—she was seduced and gave birth to a stillborn baby With what convulsions of euphemism would she handle that passage of her life? Or, more likely, it had been another outrageous fiction invented to enlist the sympathies of poor Ryle. However, compelling himself not to skip, Nigel plowed on through the suburban tennis parties, the droll accounts of school or family friends, the young Millicent's lush responses to the Beauties of Nature and the Heritage of Great Literature, her parents' incapacity to "understand" her, the wincing sensibility which she hid from them beneath a hoyden's manner, the (carefully-edited) facts of budding womanhood, the clothes she had worn and the thoughts she had thought.

All this Nigel found sufficiently unreal. And the unreality was heightened by the author's habit of naming certain people with an initial capital and a dash This secretiveness, tiresome in itself, became doubly so when Nigel discovered that the initials were fictive: in the margin, each time a new character appeared, the author had penciled an initial capital, different from the one which appeared in the text. The annotations, Nigel presumed, were an "aide-mémoire" and gave the correct initial.

Halfway through Chapter Four, he found a note from Inspector Wright pinned to the next page. "A capital G has been erased from the margin opposite line 19." A little flutter, like a cat's-paw on a calm sea, ran along Nigel's nerves He was in contact with the murderer The conviction was irrational—after all, Millicent Miles could have erased the G herself, but Nigel felt certain this was the murderer's work. Slowly he read the paragraphs in question, straining his inward ear to catch their overtones.

> It was a few weeks after my eighteenth birthday that I met the man whom I shall call Rockingham. He came into the bookshop one afternoon, and we got into conversation. Little did I realize, as we discussed the latest batch of novels upon the shelves, serene and mysterious in their dainty jackets, that this shy, gangling young man would one day be a power in the world of letters. It was enough for me to discover, as I soon did—for there must have been already an affinity between us, which enabled me to overcome our mutual shyness and draw him out—that Rockingham was a fellow craftsman· he had even had work published in magazines. Ah, the magic of print to the young aspirant! I wonder does the modern generation, who have fearlessly destroyed so many obsolete shibboleths, understand what it has lost by discarding too the fine, youthful, eager virtue of hero worship? To me, then, a writer was a god. And if this particular god transpired later to have feet of clay, no shadow of premonition darkened my bliss at this first *rencontre.*
>
> I sent him a short story I had written, and he returned it with criticism and encouragement that were worth more than a king's ransom to the diffident girl I then was. When I myself became "famous," and budding authors began to shower me with their prentice efforts, I remembered what Rockingham had once done for me I resolved to set aside one precious hour every day to help these correspondents Busy as my life has been, and with a full share of the anguish which falls to every woman's lot, I have always kept this resolution My reward has been the gratitude of literally hundreds of aspirants to the laurels. This gratitude, no less than the loyalty of my faithful readers, effaces for me the sneers of the so-called highbrows It makes me feel loved—and what woman does not want to feel loved? And it makes me humble

It was not very rewarding, thought Nigel. All he could extract from this chunk of stale, oversweetened self-praise was that "Rockingham" had had feet of clay, that his real name began with G, and that he became "a power in the world of letters."

"G " It could stand for "Goggles," who might or might not be Stephen Protheroe; it could hardly stand for Miss Miles' second husband, the racing motorist. But again, bearing in mind her practice of referring to gentlemen by their surnames alone, it might stand for Arthur Geraldine.

Nigel read on, hoping to find some explanation of "Rockingham's" feet

of clay. His name, however, did not recur in the chapter. Halfway down the last page but one of this chapter, a new paragraph started·

> So, as a writer, I was trying out my fledgling wings. But something else in me was budding too, ready to blossom at a touch of the sun. I was nineteen, an ardent, inexperienced girl, my womanhood struggling to emerge as a butterfly from the chrysalis What can a mere man—even the most sensitive and upright man (and there are some of them still to be found, thank God)—what can a man know of the sweet bewilderment, the radiant expectation, the quivering, throbbing ecstasy which possesses a girl's heart when first it turns to love, as a heliotrope to the sun? Ah, magic days, when we are in love with love! When everything is tinged with "the light that never was on sea or land"! Looking back on that time now, when the wound is healed and the bitterness has been long forgotten, I can say with the poet, "So sad, so strange, the days that are no more."
>
> Yes, I fell in love. I brought to love all the pent-up ardor, the desire to give and give and never count the cost, for which my life at home had, alas, offered no outlet The man I chose has appeared

Nigel turned the page. He did not need the note, which Inspector Wright had pinned on the next sheet, to tell him that this was the one the murderer had inserted. It was just perceptibly whiter than the pages preceding and following it, which had been stacked for months in the dusty room at Wenham & Geraldine's Unless Miss Miles had herself removed the last page of this chapter recently, and retyped it, no one but the murderer could be responsible; and Miss Miles' method of composition, rapid and uncritical, rendered it extremely improbable that she should have redrafted just this one page of the typescript. Besides, there was the evidence of the sheet found in her typewriter after the murder, taken out and then replaced out of alignment, to strengthen the likelihood that the murderer had done some typing after committing his crime Nigel read the last page of Chapter Four:

> often to me in my dreams, since the day when the destiny which had brought us together tore us apart But I never saw him again in the flesh To meet him, even after all these years, would be unthinkable Yet we seemed twin souls to each other! I loved him—yes, I confess it—as I have loved no man since I gave him . . . everything Freely, proudly, with all the passion of a nature starved for love, did I give We were both poor, struggling Marriage was out of the question Perhaps—who knows?—if I had had a child by him, we might have outfaced the poverty, survived the disillusions that the flesh is heir to, and gone through life together hand in hand. But an inscrutable Providence decreed otherwise.

Toward the end of that year I fell seriously ill. Kind friends lent me the money to go abroad and spend some months in a sanatorium When I returned, he, my beloved, was gone I will draw a veil over my sufferings. I can be thankful for them now, since they gave me the deep sympathy, the understanding of human pain and human courage, which have enabled me to help others through my books. But at the time, with nothing of his to remember him by, I lived through an eternity of loneliness, emptiness—an ice age, a desert of stone Even today, my pen falters as I trace these memories—

"Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
Oh death in life, the days that are no more."

Nigel read on to the end of the typescript. It carried Miss Miles' life as far as her third husband. There was no reference to this husband's befriending of the young Basil Ryle, nor to the episode when the authoress had been hazed in General Thoresby's mess. The birth of Cyprian Gleed was described with profuse clinical and emotional detail; thereafter, he served chiefly as a peg upon which to hang theories of child upbringing or lush sentiments about motherhood. The effect upon Nigel of some seventy thousand words of Millicent Miles was to make him long for the company of a real woman. He rang up Clare Massinger, and invited himself to dinner

After they had eaten, he handed her the two concluding pages of Chapter IV. She read them with visibly growing distaste.

"What's all this about 'my pen falters as I trace these memories'?" was her first comment. "I should have thought she'd rattle the stuff off on a typewriter."

"So she did. It's author's license. You could hardly expect her to say 'my typewriter trembles.' Anyway, she didn't write that last page."

Nigel explained. Clare's voice went into a high pitch, as she said, "But it's horrible, isn't it? Do you mean to say he sat down at the typewriter and —while she lay weltering in her gore?"

"It seems likely. The join's pretty neat, don't you think?"

"The join?"

"Yes. The page she wrote ends 'The man I chose has appeared' . . . The next page begins 'often to me in my dreams.' Why did the murderer have to substitute this last page at all? Presumably because the one for which he substituted it gave us a clue to his identity, even his motive."

"Yes, that's obvious."

"Perhaps what she had written was 'The man I chose has appeared *already in these pages.*' That would narrow things down quite a bit. In fact, it would point directly at 'Rockingham.' "

"Who on earth is Rockingham?"

"Oh, of course, you need to read this." Nigel handed her the page from the middle of the chapter, and told her about the initial G. erased from the margin. Clare perused this page, then dropped it from between finger and thumb onto the divan beside her.

"I never knew people could write like this—seriously, I mean."

"My darling Clare, do you never read the shiny magazines?"

"Good gracious no. They're written by career girls for veneer girls, aren't they?"

"Now look at that last page again Suppose the murderer didn't write it merely to conceal his identity. Suppose it's aimed positively to put us off a certain track What track would it put us off?"

Clare reread the page, brooding over it like a witch, the black hair tumbling about her wrists.

"Well," she said at last, "there's this about their not having had a child. Yes, and it's sort of repeated lower down—'nothing of his to remember him by.' Is that it?"

"Clever girl. Basil Ryle told me that Millicent had told him she was seduced at the age of nineteen, deserted by the man, and had a stillborn child."

"I don't see how a stillborn child, nearly thirty years ago, would be a motive for murder."

"But if she was romancing about that part of it? If she had a child, and it lived?"

"Well, yes," said Clare slowly. "But in that case it's she who'd have a good reason to murder the chap, not vice versa."

"Not necessarily. If this chap turned up again recently in her life, if he was a man who couldn't afford a scandal, she might have been blackmailing him over their child. Blackmailers do get murdered."

"Ye-es, I see that. But could the darling of the lending libraries afford a scandal either? If I was the chap, I'd just have called her bluff. I say, you don't think Basil Ryle is her son?"

"My *dear* Clare, what a farcical notion!"

"You're only saying that because it hadn't occurred to you," replied Clare demurely.

"But she was leading him on, as a lover—actual or prospective."

"He discovers she is really his mum, and in a fit of revulsion murders her. Just like a Greek tragedy."

"Do be serious, Clare," protested Nigel, but a little uneasily. "Ryle knows all about his parents."

"It's a wise child who— Well, who's *your* candidate for Rockingham?"

Nigel got up and began stalking round the studio, picking up objects from shelves, staring at them unseeingly, and putting them down again in the wrong place—if any place, in Clare's habitat, could be called wrong for any object.

"Protheroe or Geraldine," he said at last. "It *ought* to be Protheroe—you see, I feel in my bones that the murder must be tied up with the libel affair."

"Nigel, sweet, you're being utterly incoherent."

"Assuming it was Stephen Protheroe who fiddled with that proof copy—"

"*Stephen?* But last time we discussed it, you said—"

"Never mind what I said last time," Nigel tetchily replied. "Can't I change my mind? Stephen had far the best opportunity to tamper with the proof. And then there's the evidence of Bates."

"Shall I leave the room so that you can talk to yourself in private?"

"Sorry, love. Bates was Production Manager in the firm. Stephen has no tolerance for bores, and Bates—according to him—was a Grade A bore Yet when he's finished reading the proof, instead of getting a secretary to take it to Bates, Stephen goes along with it himself and has a jolly chat with Bates while it's being wrapped up to send to the printer. That seems to me highly suspicious."

"Why?"

"Why should he expose himself to five minutes of boredom unless he wanted to make sure that Bates didn't glance at the proof before dispatching it? The séance with Bates was the last step in an artful campaign to get the book published with its libelous passages all alive and kicking."

"All right, then," said Clare after a dubious pause. "So Protheroe is the murderer?"

"That's just the trouble. Stephen wouldn't care a damn if Millicent Miles threatened to tell the world she'd had a child by him. Arthur Geraldine, on the other hand, might. But one simply can't imagine Geraldine plunging his firm into a libel action."

Clare Massinger rose from the divan with one of the swift, sinuous movements that made her hair swirl like smoke on a gusty day, and drew Nigel down beside her.

"Poor boy. Your head's bad, isn't it?"

"Yes, this bloody sinus—"

"I mean, you're not cerebrating on all six cylinders"

"Oh. I thought you were giving me some womanly sympathy," Nigel complained.

Clare ignored the appeal. "Suppose Millicent Miles did have a living child by X. It'd be—what?—nearly thirty now. Suppose she threatened its father to tell it—call it 'him'—tell him that he was a bastard."

"Nobody minds being a bastard nowadays."

"Oh don't they just? In some circles it's thought a terrible disgrace."

Nigel went off at a tangent again. "I can't get it out of my head that Stephen must have known Miss Miles in the old days. The first time I met him, he said, 'She always—she hates puns.' Was it a near slip of the tongue? 'She always hated puns'—is that what he was about to say? Later that day he jeered at her, 'I thought your births were always painless' Oh, I know the phrases needn't have meant more than they said on the surface. And Millicent told Ryle she'd never met Stephen till this summer. But I got this strong impression of a familiarity between them. If it existed, why were they at such pains to deny it? Well, I can see only one answer to that."

"What answer?"

"That they collaborated over tampering with the proof copy, that their motive for doing so sprang from something in their past association, and therefore the association must be kept dark."

"It's all madly theoretical, isn't it?" said Clare. "I'll fix up for you to meet Mrs. Blayne—she's the woman who knew Miss Miles in her youth."

"Thank you. That might help. But then there's old shark-face—Geraldine," continued Nigel abstractedly. "Millicent told me she'd met him years ago, 'under rather strange circumstances.' And why did he let her go on occupying that room at the office and making a general nuisance of herself? And he did rather firmly warn me off digging up the past. He's married—a far better subject for blackmail than Stephen, I'd have thought, if blackmail was what Millicent got murdered for." Nigel, frowning, picked up one of Clare's little clay horses and rubbed it against his cheek. "It's odd, the way people will commit murder to achieve security. As though one could ever buy peace of mind with someone else's blood"

"Most people don't see beyond the next step. Particularly when the next step is a precipice they're pushing somebody over."

"If, on the other hand, it was Stephen Protheroe alone who fiddled with that proof, and if Miss Miles could blackmail him about it—"

"But why should she?"

"By telling him he must withdraw his opposition to the firm's reprinting her books, or she'd expose him. Awkward dilemma. He's a man of integrity—where books are concerned, anyway. But his security would be at stake

Liz Wenham told me his whole life was bound up with the firm. They'd have to sack him; he'd never get another job in publishing; and he's dried up years ago as a writer. Oh yes, if security was the motive for this murder, Stephen Protheroe's the obvious suspect."

X *REVISE*

It was a tradition of Wenham & Geraldine, handed down from the firm's earliest days, that on the last Wednesday of every month the partners and the reader should dine together. In more expansive times a private room at Skimpole's used to be engaged for these occasions; but a bomb had destroyed Skimpole's in 1944, and it being unthinkable that the firm should patronize any other restaurant for the time-hallowed observance, these dinners had been held since then in Arthur Geraldine's flat. Normally they were confined to the firm's ruling circle. But twice a year, the legendary James Wenham had laid it down, guests might be invited—a fellow publisher, a distinguished editor, a literary-minded bishop perhaps, even an author. When one of the firm's authors received such an invitation, it was understood to be a notable honorific, a medal for long service and good conduct, particularly the latter.

The strength of this tradition may be gauged by the fact that, in spite of a murder on the premises, neither to Liz Wenham nor to Arthur Geraldine did it occur for a moment that the monthly dinner should be canceled. Where the blitzes had failed, it was unlikely that poor Millicent Miles would succeed. The partners did, however, pay tribute to the out-of-jointness of the times by inviting Nigel Strangeways, although tonight's was not one of the twice-yearly guest dinners.

Arthur Geraldine had given Nigel the invitation this morning, in the manner of one who both asks and bestows a blessing. Though reporters, the police and his lawyer had been making for a harassed life, the senior partner had not lost his urbanity. Like many Irishmen, he was a natural actor, with a very hard core of realism, no doubt, beneath the smooth, fluent exterior. "Black tie, if you will," he had murmured. It was evidently part of a tradition: one must dress for dinner to keep up one's morale and self-respect in a jungle infested by wild authors, prowling literary agents, treacherous fellow publishers, and pigmy reviewers with their lethal blowpipes.

Dressing on Wednesday evening, Nigel reflected upon a day which had been most unsatisfactory. First, there was the interview with Jean, the girl for whom the lively Susan had been substituting in the Reference Library. Jean could add little to her friend's secondhand account of the altercation between Stephen Protheroe and Miss Miles; she was pretty sure that "Gog-

gles" had been used in the vocative case; also, she had heard one shocking remark made by Miss Miles—"You're just impotent!" It was odd, the way the case kept reverting to this topic—did she have a child at nineteen? Did it live? Whose was it? But Miss Miles' vindictive remark probably referred to Stephen's impotence as a writer: Nigel had heard her say to him, on another occasion, "I do *write*, anyway." Just before he left her, Jean said,

"Susan's got something on her mind She hasn't told me, but I can see it. I wish I knew—"

At this point her telephone rang. Mr. Ryle wanted her to look out two books and bring them down to his room. The interview was ended. Whatever it was that weighed upon the feather pate of Susan, Nigel had more important matters to deal with first—or so, regrettably, he assumed.

Stephen Protheroe was one of them. He looked up from a manuscript, with the dazed expression of a bookworm that has chewed its way through another inch of paper, as Nigel entered.

"What does 'Rockingham' mean to you?" asked Nigel without preamble.

"China. Also an English Prime Minister of the later eighteenth century. Why?"

"You didn't read Miss Miles' autobiography, then?"

"My *dear* fellow! I don't believe in going to meet horror halfway."

This shock tactic having failed, Nigel tried another. Yes, Stephen thought he remembered the particular row Jean had overheard. It had been about his opposition to the firm's reprinting some of Millicent's novels. Yes, she had started calling him "Goggles"; nicknaming was a feature of her lamentable schoolgirlishness; had she not called General Thoresby "Thor"? She was a woman addicted to overfamiliarity

"We found an entry in her desk diary at home," said Nigel. "For last Friday. Very cryptic. The word 'Thorsday,' with a question mark and an exclamation mark after it. What do you suppose that could mean?"

Stephen's mouth made one of its nibbling movements.

"An appointment with the General? But she wasn't sure if he'd keep it?"

"General Thoresby has told the police there was no such appointment He was out of London on Friday."

"Well then!" Stephen Protheroe threw up his hands.

"My own guess," said Nigel, "is that the entry referred to the General's book. A meeting with someone else about it. A showdown, perhaps. I'm convinced the murder and *Time to Fight* are linked somehow The police don't seem very keen on the theory," he mendaciously added; "but those are the lines I shall work on. A missing link. Buried deep in the past, maybe."

If there was an opening here, Protheroe did not take it; nor had Nigel any desire, at present, to force his hand—or, for that matter, anything to force it with. Stephen was an elusive personality, warm and stimulating at times, but capable of switching off his attention in a disconcerting way. Now, like a fish darting into an aquarium grotto, he retired again into the manuscript he had been reading.

The rest of the day was no more rewarding. Nigel found Basil Ryle too busy, or unwilling, to see him. He finally tracked down, after several telephone calls, the Mrs. Blayne whom Clare had suggested as an informant about Millicent Miles' early days; but Mrs. Blayne, a J.P. and an indefatigable committee woman, could not make time to see him till tomorrow. Late in the afternoon, he had a talk with Inspector Wright at Scotland Yard. Wright's team had extended their search, over the last twenty-four hours, from Wenham & Geraldine's offices to the private residences of the partners, Stephen Protheroe and Cyprian Gleed; none of these raised any objection; and no bloodstained clothing or galoshes had been found, no sign of anything having been burned. The murderer, in any case, had had the whole weekend to dispose of the traces of his crime. In so far as the alibis of the five for Friday evening could be checked, they had stood up to the rigorous examination; Wright's men would now have to check their movements over the whole weekend; and of course there was the usual notification of laundries, dry cleaners, old-clothes shops. But at the moment it seemed as if the murderer had walked out of his bloodbath as clean as a needle. Arthur Geraldine's razors—he was the only one who used cut-throats—had been tested in the laboratory and found guiltless. The autopsy upon the dead woman showed that the time of death must have been between 4 P.M. and midnight on Friday, probably earlier rather than later—a finding which was consistent, Wright judged, with the nailing-up of the sliding window. Little had been proved, except that the killer was an audacious and a resolute individual.

Shortly after eight o'clock Nigel rang the side-door bell at Wenham & Geraldine's. Arthur Geraldine himself opened it, and took him up to the top floor in the lift. Nigel was introduced to Mrs. Geraldine, a slim, tall, well-preserved woman, with an excessively gracious manner, some ten years younger than her husband Liz Wenham, Ryle and Protheroe were already there, conveying that atmosphere of intimacy blended with a certain disorientation and disengagement, which is so often generated when people who work together in a unit meet socially. Nigel, however, found himself fascinated less by the atmosphere than by the environment. The drawing room was a showpiece, a museum. On the mantelpiece, on shelves along three

walls, in cleverly-lit corner cupboards, there stood a ravishing array of china. Nigel was no expert on ceramics, but he could recognize the quality of what he saw here.

"I'd no idea you were a collector What exquisite things you've got."

Arthur Geraldine's eye lit up, the thin shark mouth softened. "I'm glad you like them. Yes, I suppose I'm a bit of a connoisseur"—he pronounced it, in the Irish way, "connossoor."

"Must be a life's work keeping them dusted," said Liz Wenham gruffly to her hostess.

"Oh, my husband never allows anyone else to touch them. Arthur, do give Mr. Strangeways a drink."

Geraldine was already displaying a piece to Nigel, his fingers curling round it, caressing it, as though the porcelain communicated to them its own delicacy.

"Of course. I'm sorry. Get me onto these things and I'd bore you for hours."

Basil Ryle was staring at the mantelpiece with a kind of smoldering animosity: one of those pieces, he might have been thinking, would have saved my Dad in the Slump. The face under his red hair was white and peaky, with dark rings under the eyes He looked as if he was still suffering from shock: the shock of Thursday night, wondered Nigel, or of Monday morning? Or was it he who, on Friday evening, had used the razor? Strange to think a murderer might be sitting here amid these colored tiers of porcelain that glowed like herbaceous borders

At the round table in the dining room he sat between Mrs. Geraldine and Liz Wenham. On the wall facing him hung oil paintings of two inscrutably bearded personages—the founder of the firm, James Wenham, and John Geraldine, his first partner. With a pleasant mixture of ceremony and informality, Arthur raised his glass and said, "the firm and its founder " Liz Wenham murmured the words devoutly as she drank the toast; it meant as much to her as, quite clearly, it meant all-my-eye to Basil Ryle, who made but a perfunctory response.

Nigel glanced at the side plates, noting their delicate apricot coloring.

"You have your treasures for use as well as for ornament, Mrs. Geraldine."

"Yes But we only bring out the Rockingham set on these special occasions."

Nigel hoped he did not look like a man who has been struck a violent blow in the solar plexus.

"Is it a recent acquisition?" he asked, aware of Stephen Protheroe's quizzical eye upon him.

"Oh no. My husband specialized in Rockingham ware very early—before we were married." She gave an affected little tinkle of laughter. "It was quite like marrying into a china shop."

"Yes, I picked them up cheap in the twenties," said Geraldine. "You could get bargains still in those days."

"People didn't always know the value of their own possessions," put in Stephen—a remark which sent a little waft of uneasiness round the table. It seemed to Nigel a suitable moment for moving in.

"I glanced at Miss Miles' autobiography yesterday," he said.

Arthur Geraldine broke the somewhat dismayed silence with, "And what opinion did you form of it?"

"As literature, worthless. As an unconscious character study, fascinating"

" 'Unconscious'?" said Stephen. "I'd have thought her whole life was a series of posed self-portraits."

"What is fascinating is to compare the self she exposed with the self she thought she was exhibiting."

"This is all too subtle for me," Liz Wenham said.

"And must we talk about the poor wretched woman just now?" said Mrs. Geraldine.

"Why not?" Basil Ryle muttered. "It's what we're all thinking about."

There was another awkward silence. Mrs. Geraldine had the rattled look of a veteran hostess who for once has lost control of her party. Ryle broke out again, "Why are we trying to pretend nothing has happened?"

"Because we're so damned civilized," said Stephen with a sympathetic chuckle.

"Where I come from, we called a spade a spade *And* we didn't look upon policemen as guardian angels." Basil Ryle had already been drinking: his words, his glances round the table, were slurred. "They were at me last night Why did you visit the deceased on Thursday? From information received, we understand you had a violent disagreement with her. What was the subject of this disagreement? Did you have another meeting with her, subsequent to the scene at her house? Did I, in other words, walk into her room here and cut her throat? Sweet Christ!"

A meaningless smile was frozen onto Mrs. Geraldine's face. Liz Wenham, her rosy-apple cheeks and bright clear eyes, together with her elaborate, unbecoming toilet of coffee-colored lace, making her look like a child in fancy dress, came to the rescue.

"My dear Basil, of course you didn't. That's quite out of the question. But you must pull yourself together. The trouble with you is that you will bottle everything up—it's just asking for an explosion." Liz Wenham's tone was pure and wholesome as a North Country beck. "You had a row with Miss Miles. All right I don't blame you. But why turn the whole thing into a Strindberg melodrama? It's morbid. Worse than that, it's maudlin self-pity."

"Well, I must say—" Basil laughed shakily, subdued by this cold douche "I expect you're right, Liz, but—"

"Of course I'm right And I want to enjoy this delicious *tournedos.* If we must have a post-mortem, let's keep it for after dinner."

At this point Nigel led Geraldine to talk about the history of the firm, which the senior partner was glad to do, showing himself also a ripe anecdotalist. The dynasty of Wenham & Geraldine had been unbroken for over a hundred years. Arthur and Liz were the third generation. Liz went into the firm from Girton. Arthur succeeded a cousin, who had died in 1925; he had not intended to make publishing his profession, but as the nearest in line of succession to John Geraldine, after the cousin's death, he had thought it wrong to refuse. The strength of this dynastic feeling was evident in the way both Arthur and Liz talked about the firm; it could be called fanaticism, were it not so absolutely calm and self-assured. Personal ambition, if it existed in them at all, came second to the firm's prestige. No wonder, thought Nigel, the libel business was such a blow to them; but how far would either of them carry this loyalty? as far as, in the last resort, destroying someone who was a threat to the firm's good name? No, that's surely unthinkable. But if Arthur Geraldine is "G"—is "Rockingham"? If he had an illegitimate child and deserted its mother? Would not such a revelation, even nowadays, cause a respectable pillar of publishing to totter?

After dinner, when they had drunk their coffee in the drawing room, Mrs. Geraldine left them. It was the normal practice on these occasions, though tonight it was not done so that the partners could talk shop. As the door closed behind his hostess, Nigel felt a tension in the air the other three were looking at him, expectantly and uneasily He answered the unspoken question:

"Afraid there's nothing much to tell you yet. I had a talk with Inspector Wright this afternoon; but he's a bit at sea—too few clues and too many suspects."

"Too *many?*" said Arthur Geraldine. "You mean we're all under suspicion?"

"I'm glad to hear it. I thought I had been cast as the murderer," said Basil Ryle.

"Really now, Basil! Just because you had a difference of opinion with—"

"Difference of opinion!" The young man laughed harshly. "That's like Dr. Johnson calling Ben Nevis a not inconsiderable protuberance."

Nigel eyed Ryle noncommittally. "It could be argued that your quarrel with Millicent Miles points to your innocence."

"A pretty paradox," said Stephen. "Pray enlarge upon it."

"The murder was premeditated and very carefully worked out. Ryle would hardly have time for that between Thursday night and Friday evening. But, if he'd planned it well in advance, he'd not call attention to himself by squabbling with his victim the night before. By the way, what were you squabbling about?"

"I prefer not to say."

"Oh, Basil, don't be so noble!" said Liz Wenham strenuously. "We're your friends, I hope Even if you had to keep it from the police—"

"Very well, Liz, if you must have it," Ryle blurted out. "I was fond of her. I'd thought she—well, had some feeling for me. I found I was wrong. She disabused me of the notion very thoroughly."

"Because she'd discovered you couldn't be of use to her?" asked Nigel. "Over reissuing her novels? Something like that?"

Ryle nodded, miserably, his eyes cast down. Liz Wenham broke out: "And about time you were disabused, Basil. Trailing after that woman as though she was an angel of light!"

"You don't stop loving somebody because she turns out—turns out—" Basil Ryle's voice, almost inaudible, guttered down to nothing. No one could look at him Stephen Protheroe broke the embarrassed silence:

"Well, Basil has been cleared. What about the other candidates?"

"Nobody has been *cleared,*" said Nigel. "Not yet. The other candidates, as you call them, are in this room Plus Cyprian Gleed, of course."

Arthur Geraldine looked shocked. "My dear fellow, are you suggesting that Miss Wenham, or—or I—?"

"The police are bound to suspect anyone whose alibi is unconfirmed. They go for the obvious first, and they are usually right. Cyprian Gleed is the obvious suspect, because he had a strong motive and his alibi is unsupported. But they can't do anything about it till they find the weapon, or some bloodstained clothing, or the spare key to the side door here "

"Ah, so that's why they've started asking about our movements on Saturday and Sunday," said Geraldine.

"Yes. The murderer might not have disposed of the weapon, etc., till

then." Nigel paused for a moment. "You see, none of you has an adequate alibi even for the period when the murder was being committed. Mr. Geraldine was alone in his room from 5:20 to 5.50—these times are all approximate of course. Mr. Ryle was alone in *his* room from 5:25 to 6:00. Miss Wenham was alone in her room from 5.20 to 5:30; she then left the office—that's corroborated; but theoretically she could have let herself in again at the side door, killed Miss Miles, and still got to her cocktail party in Chelsea by 6 P.M. or soon after."

"But it's absolutely fantastic to suppose that Liz—" protested Geraldine.

"I'm simply telling you what's in Wright's mind. It has also occurred to him that a woman might wear galoshes, several sizes too big for her, to confuse the investigation. Well then, there's Protheroe. Miss Sanders confirms that he left the building at 5.20. We know that he caught the 6 05 at Waterloo, because his friends met the train at the other end. He says he walked to Waterloo over Hungerford Bridge. But he too could have popped back into this building by the side door, and—"

"No, he couldn't," Liz interrupted. "It's bolted inside till 5:30."

"I could have undone the bolts, though," offered Stephen, *"then* gone out through the reception room, then—"

"Stephen, I wish you wouldn't talk like that," Liz Wenham said, half scoldingly. Her affection for the little man had never been so evident to Nigel.

"All this popping out and popping in is nonsense," Arthur Geraldine declared. "You'd be spotted returning to the office Particularly at 5.30, when a lot of the staff are leaving by the side door."

"I think it's morbid talking like this at all." Liz Wenham's face was flushed. "It's preposterous to suppose that one of us could commit a murder —that sort of murder, anyway."

"All right," said Stephen Protheroe. "We four are much too decent to kill even a Millicent Miles So, by elimination, Cyprian Gleed must be the culprit. No doubt he has a watertight alibi which the eminent sleuth, Strangeways, will finally puncture."

"No. He was alone in his flat from 4:30 to 7, he says. He can't prove this, and we can't disprove it—so far. He says he was expecting a visit from his mother, fixed up by telephoning her here the previous afternoon; he expected her sometime between 5.30 and 6.30; he was alone during the period because he wanted to have a private conversation with her "

"You think he made all this up?" asked Geraldine.

"If an alibi was in his mind, I'd have thought he could have cooked up

something a bit better. And Miriam Sanders says a call did come through from him to his mother on Thursday afternoon."

"Well, that settles it then."

"I'm sorry, it does not. Cyprian could have rung up to make an appointment with her *here*. Or he may have persuaded Miriam Sanders to invent the telephone call."

"But—"

"She's his mistress. And, I fear, quite under his thumb."

"Miriam?" exclaimed Liz Wenham. "But she's a First in History."

Even Basil Ryle joined in the laughter Flushing, Liz added, "I don't mean that history scholars don't go to bed with people. But she's a clever girl, ambitious too—she'd never take up with a worthless little runt like Gleed."

"Oh, Liz," said Ryle. "I'm clever and ambitious, and look who I took up with."

"That's entirely different."

"It occurs to me," said Geraldine slowly, "if the telephone call did come through, and if someone overheard it—or Miss Miles could have mentioned to someone here that she was going to have an interview with her son the next day—well, it'd give the murderer—but of course that's pure speculation. I—"

"What on earth are you dithering about, Arthur?" Liz sounded pettish.

Stephen Protheroe grinned at her. "I'm perpetually being reminded that Millicent occupied the adjoining room. As if I needed a reminder! What Arthur was trying to say is that I could have overheard the telephone conversation, known from it that Gleed would be alone in his flat on Friday evening, and arranged the crime for that period so as to throw suspicion on the wretched youth."

"Oh really now, Stephen!" Geraldine began to protest.

"And did you?" asked Nigel.

"Arrange the murder?"

"Overhear the telephone conversation?"

Stephen Protheroe hesitated a moment before replying, "I seem to remember her telephone bell going that afternoon. it didn't ring often But I couldn't have heard what she said."

At this point Nigel's sinus began to ache fiercely again, and with apologies to his host he disposed himself full length on a sofa to inject the nose drops, sympathetically watched by the others. Their faces, and the beautiful ranks of porcelain, swung in a semicircle, then swung back, as dizzy for a

moment, he resumed an upright posture. He found himself gazing at Liz Wenham's eyes, noting in them an abstracted, apprehensive look which he had never seen there before. Becoming aware of his scrutiny, she said,

"You ought to have it operated on. No good tinkering about with patent remedies."

"I've been advised against what they call surgical interference."

Arthur Geraldine leaned forward. "One thing I can't understand—why do the police think it happened between five and six?"

"Between 5·20 and 6, you mean. Protheroe didn't leave his room till 5.20." Nigel explained about the nailing-up of the sliding window. "That suggests the crime was committed while there were still people in the office: but your staff all leave not later than 5.30 on Fridays. The only danger, from the murderer's point of view, was that one of the partners might be working till later. In fact, two of you were."

Liz said, "I can't think why it has to be assumed that the murderer is one of us, or one of the staff."

"It's only assumed that the murderer was someone the victim knew, and was probably expecting—someone, at any rate, familiar with the layout and working hours of the office."

Basil Ryle had been looking more and more puzzled "But do you mean to say—? However well she knew the murderer, surely she'd think it very queer if he started nailing up that window?"

"Oh, that was done *after* the murder."

"*What?* I thought you said it was done as a precaution against his being caught—"

"Not caught in the act of murder. Caught doing what he had to do after it."

The partners looked at one another in bewilderment.

"*After* the murder?" said Stephen Protheroe. "But that's fantastic! He wouldn't hang around—"

"Destroying his traces, you mean? Laying false clues, or something?" asked Geraldine.

Nigel was thinking fast. He had to make a snap decision. If the murderer was one of these four, he might be put on his guard or he might be rattled by what Nigel could say at this point.

"I don't know if—it's just a conjecture of mine," he slowly began. "Well, say a hunch Suppose the secret of this crime lies in Millicent Miles' past. Suppose her autobiography contained a vital clue to motive. The murderer might have known this, or guessed it. If so, he'd want to find the page in

her book that would give him away, and remove it. So he'd nail up the window—"

Liz Wenham almost exploded with impatience "Are you seriously suggesting that he sat down, after killing her, to read through two hundred pages of typescript? He'd take the whole lot away, surely, and destroy it?"

"Not necessarily. A more subtle mind—and I think we're dealing with a subtle mind—might prefer to take away only the incriminating page or pages—"

"Well, are any missing?" asked Ryle.

"No But he might have nailed up that window to give him time for typing substitute pages. One of your staff did hear someone typing in Miss Miles' room at 5:30 last Friday."

Arthur Geraldine exclaimed, "Oh, but that's too bizarre, my dear fellow. Surely you're wasting your time—"

"I don't agree at all, Arthur," said Stephen Protheroe. "I'm almost beginning to get interested in the crime myself. If Strangeways is right, it presents a pretty exercise in textual criticism: which pages, if any, can be shown on internal evidence to have been written by another hand? Or perhaps—" he smiled engagingly at Nigel—"you've already discovered that?"

"No As I told you, I've only had time just to glance at the book. I'll have to get down to it tomorrow—no, I've got interviews then—the day after tomorrow."

Liz Wenham said, "But isn't it a job for the police?"

"Well, yes. However, Inspector Wright knows me pretty well, and literary detection isn't his line."

"I wouldn't mind having a go at this," declared Stephen with animation. "I'll have to read the darned thing sometime, anyway, if we're still going to publish it. Perhaps we could collaborate over the problem."

"Don't be so ghoulish, Stephen," said Liz.

"It might be useful," Nigel said, politely but noncommittally. Well, he thought, some sort of a trap has been baited. Now let's wait and see if anyone falls into it within the next twenty-four hours or so

He was on the point of rising to go when Stephen Protheroe remarked, "Oh, by the way, what was that you were saying about Rockingham this morning? Something to do with the autobiography, I gathered."

"Yes. I happened to notice the name in an early chapter. Miss Miles gives some of the people in her book pseudonyms. She seems to have known this 'Rockingham' pretty well I just thought, if I could find out who he was,

I might get a line on her young days from him—you never know what may come in useful."

Arthur Geraldine's thin lips were stretched so tightly, Nigel observed, that they almost disappeared into his face.

XI *BRING BACK*

To Nigel, whose type figure of the public woman had been Dr. Edith Summerskill, Mrs. Blayne came as something of a surprise. Her voice was soft and melodious, her presence unformidable; she resembled some neat, shy, energetic bird—a dipper, perhaps—as she sat at the restaurant table, her black suit edged with white piqué at collar and cuffs, her head bobbing over the menu. It was the day after the dinner party, and Nigel had invited Clare Massinger to lunch as well.

When they had chosen their food—a lengthy undertaking with Clare, who was always thrown into a paralysis of indecision by a well-stocked menu —Nigel told Mrs. Blayne a little about the case in which he was involved.

"So, you see," he ended, "it's a matter of getting a line back into her early days. Clare told me you'd known her then."

"Oh yes, we were at school together. Wimblesham High School. I knew her quite well as a girl. Then I got a scholarship to Somerville, and we rather drifted apart. But I still used to see her from time to time in the vacations."

"When she was working in the bookshop?"

"Yes." Mrs. Blayne's neat head bobbed at him, and she came out with a charming little cascade of laughter. "Funny, the things one remembers. Have you ever seen an assistant in a bookshop actually reading?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"Well, she used to. Whenever I went in, she had her head in a book. Always a novel. I was rather priggish about the trash she read. Poor Millie! And I think she was jealous of me being at the university It was an uneasy sort of friendship."

"Women's friendships always are," remarked Clare. "We're perpetually trying to improve one another, and resenting one another for it."

"But she had men friends too?" Nigel asked.

"Dozens, if you could believe her. But she was a wonderful romancer, even at school; she at least made you suspend your disbelief. The English mistress said once that Millie's flair for fiction was worthy of a better cause. Which could be her epitaph, I suppose, poor woman." Mrs. Blayne paused to sip her martini. "On the Bench, you know, I get girls of that sort up before me every week. For petty theft, shoplifting, and so on. They simply

can't distinguish between reality and their own fantasies. And they'll always put the blame for their misdemeanors somewhere else—on their own bad luck, on parents who don't 'understand' them, on society which won't give them a break. I'm talking too much."

"Not a bit. It's helping to fill in the picture. You'd say Millicent Miles, as a girl, was a potential delinquent?"

"I hate that word. But, yes, I suppose she was. The difference was that she had an uncanny knack for staying out of trouble, for evading the results of actions for which she had been responsible."

"You mean, she threw the blame on other people?" asked Clare.

"It isn't as simple as that. She was a strong personality, of course, full of vitality and magnetism, what used to be called a tomboy. At school she was always the center of a group. But there was this other side to her—a streak of slyness—no, of incorrigible self-deception, so that, when she did something wrong, she could dissociate herself from it—pretend to herself it had never happened, and take herself in so successfully that sometimes other people were taken in too."

Mrs Blayne paused, while they were helped to the first course. Then the reminiscent look returned to her eyes.

"Her father was a totally impossible creature. I suppose she caught it from him. Always living beyond his means—I remember my parents talking about it when he went bankrupt. Oh yes, that reminds me, it was just about then—the bankruptcy time—when I got a curious insight into Millie. It must have been our last year at school She confided in me one day that a man had made a pass at her; we didn't call it that then, but Millie spared no detail. I heard later that she had confided it to quite a few other girls as well, and the story grew more lurid by repetition. I was a senior prefect then, and full of public spirit—a horrible little prig, in fact. I told her she must denounce this man to her parents. She said she did not dare—he'd threatened terrible things if she tried to expose him. So I said I'd report it to the head mistress Millie begged me not to, but off I trotted. Fortunately, the head mistress was a sensible woman. She sent for Millie at once and confronted her with my evidence. And Millie got away with it, you know. She said she'd done it to pull my leg—it was all a joke—it just showed what an unhealthy mind I had, that I could take the absurd story seriously. But she had such an open, wholesome, antiseptic sort of air when she confessed to the leg pull, it really made me feel a complete fool—as if I *had* a foul imagination She was reprimanded, of course; but the H M. clearly accepted it all as a bit of not-so-clean fun on Millie's part, and of overzealousness on mine."

Clare asked, "Had she in fact made it all up?"

"I'll never know. She was quite capable of it: anything to dramatize herself. On the other hand"—Mrs. Blayne gave a little grimace—"she was a physically mature girl at that age."

"Did she tell you the man's name?" said Nigel

"No. She said he'd come to the house when her parents were out. He was a commercial traveler—no, I remember now—a representative of the *Daily Sun,* you know the circulation scheme newspapers ran in the twenties: take out a year's subscription to the *Daily Sun,* and we give you absolutely free a set of Charles Dickens' novels."

"She didn't describe his appearance?"

"I don't think so. Just one thing stuck in my mind, though—Millie saying to me, with bated breath and a quite devastating sexual precocity, 'Julia, never trust a man who has thin lips.' "

"Indeed?" said Nigel, poker-faced. "Well, well It's a small world. But not so small that there aren't thousands of thin-lipped men in it."

"You mustn't mind him, Julia He has a bad habit of talking aloud to himself. And don't let your food get cold."

As Mrs. Blayne caught up with her eating, Nigel pondered upon one of the entries in *Who's Who,* which he had consulted with the forward Susan leaning against his shoulder. Arthur Geraldine's entry gave no information for the period between "Educated at . . ." and "Joined staff of Wenham & Geraldine, 1925."

"What year did this happen—the *Daily Sun* representative making a pass at Millicent Miles?" he presently asked.

"It was our last year at school. the summer term of 1924."

"Yes, it would fit."

"Mysterious old cuss, aren't you?" said Clare affectionately.

"Did you go to the Miles house much?"

"Not a great deal Millie was a bit ashamed of her parents, I think. Too coarse-grained for the sensitive soul she made herself out to be—oh dear, that's rather uncharitable. It was the usual hideous little semidetached. Mrs. Miles was terribly houseproud, though The scouring and dusting type And oh so respectable. One took tea in the front parlor, I remember—cold as a morgue, and all cluttered up with atrocious objects About half the room was taken up by a huge glass-fronted cabinet filled with plates, which I've no doubt were never used."

"Would they have been, by any chance," inquired Nigel, gazing noncommittally down his nose, "plates of a delicate apricot color?"

Mrs. Blayne looked prodigiously startled. "Yes, they were. But how on earth—?"

"I should have warned you," said Clare. "Nigel has strange powers. He is a species of warlock."

"You were visualizing the plates, weren't you, Mrs. Blayne? Extrasensory perception is much less rare than one supposes," Nigel equivocally remarked. "They were sold up, presumably, when Mr. Miles went bankrupt "

"That I can't tell you. I never actually visited the house after that scene with the head mistress. I felt pretty sore with Millie over it, and chucked her for a bit."

"But later you came together again."

"Yes, I was sorry for her about the bankruptcy Not that I really needed to be—she made an enthralling drama out of it for herself."

"How long did she work in the bookshop?"

"About two years, I think Then she got ill—yes, that must have been in 1926, my second year at Oxford. She told me she'd got T.B. and was going to a sanatorium—in Switzerland, was it?—I'm very vague about it all now. Soon after that, my own parents moved away from Wimblesham and I lost touch with her completely."

"What about men friends during the bookshop period?"

Julia Blayne did not think she could help much here. Millicent, she suspected, would have been as secretive about any real affair as she was communicative about imaginary ones. Besides, in the circles where Millicent moved at that time, bankruptcy was a disgrace, and the local youth fought shy of her for a while—Mrs. Blayne remembered her friend's resentment over this.

"Did she talk to you about her literary ambitions at all?"

"Oh yes In fact she inflicted quite a number of her compositions on me," Mrs. Blayne dryly answered.

"She never mentioned striking up a friendship with a young writer, a man who helped her with her writing?"

"No But, as I say, she could be very secretive."

Clare, who had been digging into a zabaglione, looked up dreamily. "There was no National Health Service in the twenties, was there?"

"Quite correct, love. I'm glad to hear you're studying social history."

"So how could she afford a sanatorium?"

"I have an idea she told me some relation was stumping up for it," said Mrs. Blayne. "She said she'd send me the address of the sanatorium, but she never did."

"It's a leading question, I'm afraid," said Nigel slowly, "but did it ever

occur to you, or anyone who knew her at the time, that she was really going off to have a baby or to get rid of one?"

The J.P. in Julia Blayne came uppermost. "It certainly didn't at the time," she briskly replied. "Not to me, at any rate. And if there was any gossip, I didn't hear it. But of course it's quite possible. Millie was looking very pale. And I remember her being sick the last time I took her out for a picnic lunch on the Common. I put it all down to T.B. then, knowing nothing about it."

"She never mentioned the name 'Protheroe' to you? Or 'Rockingham'? Or 'Geraldine'?"

"Not that I remember."

Nigel had expected nothing else. If Millicent Miles had had an affair with a man at the age of eighteen or nineteen, she would have kept it a clandestine one.

"She *used* people," Julia Blayne was saying. "That's the basic impression of her that remains in my mind after all these years. She used people, absolutely shamelessly and ruthlessly, as a clever child uses grownups."

"She seems to have used up three husbands," Clare remarked. "And I suppose she used people she knew for characters in her absurd novels."

"Oh God!" groaned Nigel. "Don't tell me I've got to read *them* now!"

"You don't. I have."

"*What?*"

"Well, the first one. I found a copy yesterday. Published in 1928. All about an innocent young typist who has an illy-jitty by a plausible gentleman of too much leisure and is deserted and ostracized and generally has a rough time till she marries the boss's hard-working son who has always loved her in a solid, silent, respectful sort of way."

"Well, bless my soul! And first novels are usually reckoned to be autobiographical."

Shortly after this, the busy Mrs. Blayne said she must go. Nigel got one or two names from her; but the one he wanted most was useless: Mrs. Blayne, returning to Wimblesham after the war for a school reunion, had heard that the bookshop and its owner had been destroyed by a bomb in 1940

The whole damned case is a cat's-cradle of dead ends, Nigel said to himself as he made his way to Fleet Street In the offices of the *Daily Sun,* however, one of his long shots was proved successful. The managing editor, with whom he had fixed an appointment by telephone, had the records searched. The *Daily Sun*'s representative in the Wimblesham area, for the big circulation drive of 1924, had been a certain Arthur Geraldine.

"Well, what do you know? He's a top publisher now, isn't he? Got a honey of a libel case coming up—that the man? Never realized he'd worked for us. Before my time, of course."

"Would there be anyone still on the paper who knew him then?"

"Doubt it. We all get fired after a few years, if we don't curl up and die of the horrors first. Wait a minute, though. Old Jackson survived. Was our Advertising Manager. Retired to a life of ill-earned leisure last year. Eunice, get Mr. Jackson's address, will you?"

So much depends, thought Nigel, as he made his way out to Putney to interview the retired Mr. Jackson—so much depends on Millicent Miles' autobiography. How far can it be trusted? How can one discern the objective facts beneath all the subjective, protective coloring she so freely splashed over them? Does that erased "G" stand for Arthur Geraldine? Does she call him "Rockingham" through an association with the Rockingham ware in the cabinet in that terrible little front parlor? If so, was it a chance association or a more deliberate one? Back in the twenties, Stephen Protheroe had rather maliciously remarked, "people didn't always know the value of their own possessions." Suppose Arthur Geraldine, the *Daily Sun* representative, the fanatical collector, had seen the Rockingham set when first he visited the Miles' house, and offered Millicent's father a fiver for it? Mr. Miles was already nearly on the rocks in that summer of 1924; he might well have jumped at the offer, not knowing that the real value of the set was many times greater. Certainly a Rockingham dinner set, of the same delicate apricot color, now graced the Geraldines' table and had been "acquired" some time before their marriage in 1930.

But, though it would have been a sufficiently mean act—a bit of flagrant near-robbery, one could hardly suppose it a strong card for Millicent Miles to play, thirty years later, in a blackmail game, certainly not strong enough to compel Geraldine to kill her rather than be exposed. On the other hand, the purchase of the set might have brought Geraldine into closer contact with the Miles family. He would have been in his early twenties then, and Millicent was a sexually mature girl; if, a little later, he became her lover, one could understand her referring to him as "Rockingham" in her memoirs. Geraldine had certainly become "a power in the world of letters." It was difficult, perhaps, to think of him as ever having been a "shy, gangling young man"; but here, Miss Miles' cliché-ridden style must be reckoned with for her, all young men might be shy and gangling.

The main snag in this theory was that, according to her autobiography, she first met "Rockingham" a few weeks after her eighteenth birthday. Her birthday was August 3. The episode of the man ("Never trust a man with

thin lips") who, she alleged, had made a pass at her, occurred in the summer term, when she was still seventeen. Of course, her memory for dates might well have been defective; or some obscure mental process might have caused her deliberately to postdate the first meeting; or, yet again, if the story of his making a pass at her was a fabrication (wish-fulfillment?), she might only have *seen* him when he visited her parents' house as the *Daily Sun* representative, and not *met* him till he came into the bookshop a month later.

Mr. Jackson, a rubicund, white-haired man, received Nigel hospitably.

"Tea or whisky? We always had something in the office at 3:30, and I like to keep up old customs."

Opting for tea, Nigel presently explained, with some caution, the object of his visit.

"Geraldine? Geraldine? Yes, I remember him," said Mr. Jackson, bouncing vivaciously in his chair. "He's come up in the world, hasn't he? When was it now?—middle twenties. Yes. His Lordship, our proprietor"—Mr. Jackson piously crossed himself—"had one of his farcical notions for raising the tone of the paper Signed on a number of university men. No, not me, I came from the gutter. Geraldine was one of them. Next thing, his Lordship had yet another bright idea—he swarms with ideas, you know, like lice—why not use these highly-educated types to push our circulation campaign? We were offering a complete set of the World's Great Novels, with knobs on, if you took out a year's subscription to the rag, see? Well then, his Lordship conceives this truly Napoleonic notion—send out the university boys to tout for subscriptions. For why?—as we say in our editorials. Because they can unload their book learning onto the prospective customers—tell them exactly why they'll never be really human till they've read the World's Great Novels, complete set bound in elegant linoleum, absolutely free gift in return for one year's subscription. You get the beauty of it?"

Nigel admitted that he did.

"The Oxford and Cambridge chums were properly riled, I can tell you. All they wanted was to write beautiful prose and get by-lines. Instead, the poor sods had to go padding round the outer purlieus giving private lectures on Dustyeffski and who have you to a lot of morons who only wanted to curl up with a nice sizzler by Elinor Glyn. Took the bloom off the Blues in no time, believe you me."

"How did Geraldine get on at the racket?"

"He lived to tell the tale. Only with us about a year, I think. Then he retired gracefully into publishing."

"Did you see much of him?"

"A bit. The noble army of martyrs had to report in at the office twice a week and have their corns attended to Dour, stocky chap—a slit where his mouth should be—Irish—a bit of a lad with the girls, I'd guess. Though I'd rather be kissed by a shark, myself. Mutatis, of course, mutandis."

"No actual scandal about a girl? One of the customers' daughters?"

"Not that I heard. And if he'd forced his welcome attentions on a young female, it'd have been all over the office before she'd had time to renew her lipstick."

"Would it have been part of his job as a representative to visit the local bookshops?"

"Bless your heart, no. We were in competition, don't you see? Course he might have gone in to *buy* a book—never know what these university types aren't capable of when roused."

"You say they all had literary ambitions. Do you remember if Arthur Geraldine wrote at all then?"

"Now you're asking something. Couldn't be sure, but I've an idea he had a piece or two in the hoilier-than-thou weeklies. But his real hobby was collecting bits of china. Probably that's why he stuck the job as long as he did. While he's explaining the benefits of the *Daily Sun* free gift scheme, he can run his eye over the mantelpiece and see if the client's harboring a Dresden angel unawares. Wimblesham was more countrified those days, and the natives wouldn't always know the value of the sweet little vases Great Aunt Flossie had left them He picked up quite a few bargains, I know for a fact, in the crockery line Remember him panting back to the office one day with a dinner plate in his bag—one of a set he'd chiseled some sucker out of—not that he put it that way; you should have heard him crooning over it! Looked like any other dinner plate to me."

"What color?"

"Oh, a sort of washed-out brown Browny-yellow."

"Apricot?"

"Fair enough."

Nigel's mood of elation, on leaving the ebullient Mr. Jackson, was short-lived. It seemed certain that Arthur Geraldine had "acquired" the Rockingham set during his house-to-house canvassing of Wimblesham in 1924. It seemed likely, but was in no way proved, that this set had belonged to the Mileses. If, as a girl, Millicent Miles had known about the transaction, if, last summer, she recognized Arthur Geraldine as the quondam *Daily Sun* representative who had bought the set at far below its true value, this would explain both Geraldine's unwillingness for Nigel to start digging up the remote past, and the unusual concessions he had made to Miss Miles She

might well have been putting pressure on him. But the affair of the Rockingham set was still nothing like adequate motive for murder.

And what possible link could there be between this and the dirty work with the proof copy of *Time to Fight?*

If, on the other hand, Millicent Miles had had a child by Rockingham-Geraldine in 1926, if he had abandoned her and the child, then she would have a far stronger blackmailing card against him, and he a proportionately stronger motive for murder. But why had she not played it years ago? She had moved in the literary world since about 1930; she would be bound to know that Arthur Geraldine had become a successful publisher. Perhaps the answer was that only recently, when her stock as a writer had slumped, would she need to apply pressure on Geraldine.

The child, Nigel reflected as the underground train rushed him back to Kensington, would be thirty now. What had happened to him, or her? Not that there was the least evidence he had ever existed—only a tenuous hint given by the page the murderer had inserted in the dead woman's autobiography—the (deliberately misleading?) statement that she never had a child by her first lover.

Nigel's eye was caught by a headline in the newspaper a man opposite him was reading. NATIONAL SERVICE TO BE CUT? Some of the young soldiers destroyed in the "holocaust" of the Ulombo barracks, he recollected, were National Servicemen. A spark leaped a gap, and the two dark poles of the case were suddenly linked in Nigel's mind. The Ulombo barracks affair had taken place in 1947, when Millicent Miles' child would have been twenty-one—National Service age.

And was there ever a more hare-brained conjecture than that? thought Nigel as he came out into Kensington High Street—a cobweb theory built upon a mere coincidence Of course it must be a coincidence.

Nevertheless, he was walking very fast indeed up Campden Hill Road, impatient to get to the telephone.

When he had let himself into the flat, his housekeeper told him that a young gentleman had arrived an hour ago, asking to see him. A Mr. Gleed She had told him that Mr Strangeways might not be back for some time, but he said he would wait. Mrs. Anson was clearly a bit flustered. strangers who arrived unannounced and refused to go presented a problem she could not cope with Assuring her that no harm had been done, Nigel entered the sitting room.

Cyprian Gleed had made himself at home. He was sitting in Nigel's armchair, with a glass of Nigel's whisky at his elbow, and his mother's autobiography on his lap.

"Good evening," said Nigel coldly. "I see you found the decanter. Wouldn't you like some water with it?"

"No thanks." Cyprian Gleed seemed unsnubbable. "I didn't mean to stay so long, but I couldn't resist this horror comic," he added, indicating the typescript on his lap.

"I see. Well, excuse me a minute." Nigel went into his bedroom and picked up the extension telephone there. General Thoresby, he was told, would be home shortly. Nigel left a message, asking the General to ring him as soon as possible.

The purpose of Cyprian Gleed's visit was not immediately apparent. He complained of being incessantly questioned and followed by policemen. He resented being told nothing about the progress of the investigation Finally, by a devious route, he came to the point. When could he expect to inherit his mother's estate?

"Why ask me? You should deal with her solicitors"

"Oh, they just say there are the usual formalities to go through I don't understand all their legal jargon. What formalities?"

"Well, they have to make sure there's no will, and that you *are* the next of kin."

"But there's no question of that" Gleed's red lips twisted behind the black beard, as he jabbed a finger at the typescript "She seems to have had some squalid love affairs at a tender age, but she makes it quite clear the union was unblessed by fruit And she certainly didn't have any other children by her various legitimate husbands."

"You'd be fairly safe to borrow on your expectations, then."

"You think so? Do you lend money, by any chance?"

"Not to you."

Gleed took another drag of his neat whisky. "I suppose Wenham & Geraldine aren't going to publish this tripe now?"

"Why not? It's unfinished, but—"

"Good God! Have you read it? The meanderings of an imperfectly sublimated nymphomaniac! How the hell should I ever live it down?"

"What do you care? It'll bring you in a lot more money. That's all you're interested in, isn't it?"

"Ah, you're shocked Money's a dirty word—never mentioned in your high-minded circles," jeered Cyprian "Whereas mothers are holy, however bitchy—"

"You really are a contemptible little creature," Nigel broke in, speaking with icy deliberation. "You talk like a permanent adolescent, and behave like a spoilt child Do you really think you impress anyone by mouthing all

this vicious muck about your mother? The trouble with you is that you've got no talents and no charm—you're a total failure as a human being, and you know it—so you've got to compensate by making a pretentious nuisance of yourself all round. Well, did you cut your mother's throat or didn't you? There are no witnesses present. You've a chance to make yourself really interesting for once, and with impunity. Come on, my bold little Orestes."

Nigel's outburst, though sharpened by the sheer physical revulsion he felt for Cyprian Gleed, was a calculated experiment. How would Gleed respond to treatment even more outrageous than his own utterances?

Cyprian Gleed stared back venomously at Nigel. "Have you quite finished your orgasm?"

"You've often wished your mother dead. But you'd neither the brains nor the nerve to kill her. That's why you spent so much time shooting off your poisonous tongue at her, from a safe distance. Well, she's dead now So you can stop shooting."

"Ah, I thought the *de mortuis* stuff was due. That is really more than I can face. I must be going Sorry to leave you in uncertainty about my matricidal history; but when next you try a bit of psychological vivisection, I'd recommend you to use a scalpel, or even a razor, not a blunt flint—it was all too painfully obvious." A singular, gloating expression came and went on Cyprian Gleed's face. "I find you quite remarkably antipathetic. Do you mind if I use your lavatory to be sick in?"

"First door on the right down the passage."

As Cyprian was going out, the telephone bell rang.

"I'll let myself out, when I've finished," Cyprian said. "You probably won't be seeing me again."

The door closed behind him, and Nigel took up the receiver.

"Strangeways? Thoresby here. You asked me to ring you."

"Yes. That Ulombo barracks affair. Have you got the casualty list?"

"Just a minute. I'll dig it out of my files. They were all scuppered, y'know. Hold on."

When the General was back on the line, Nigel asked, "Can you tell me, is there a Geraldine on the list, or a Miles?"

"Now what the devil are you up to, my dear fellow? I don't remember a —I'll look."

The twenty seconds of silence seemed twenty minutes to Nigel. At last General Thoresby said, "No. Drawn a blank there, I'm afraid."

Nigel felt the disappointment like a kick in the belly. Yet his had been a pretty wild shot in the dark.

"Very good of you, sir. I'm sorry to have bothered you. Just another theory of mine miles off the target."

"Wait a bit, my boy. If you're interested in literary names, publishing names and so forth, what price Protheroe?"

"Protheroe?"

"Yes. Isn't that the name of Wenham & Geraldine's reader?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, there's a Paul Protheroe on this casualty list. A corporal One of the National Servicemen who was on the strength there."

XII *LEAD IN*

While Nigel Strangeways was delving into the remoter past, Inspector Wright and his team had been investigating the more recent. At a conference the morning after General Thoresby's telephone call, the two men pooled their information Double-checking their movements of the previous Friday, Wright had finally eliminated from suspicion such peripheral figures as the General himself and the dead woman's third husband. the latter had had no personal contact with her since their divorce. As to the Wenham & Geraldine people, and Cyprian Gleed, Wright's inquiries had still produced mainly negative results.

It was clear to Nigel that the Inspector had been concentrating upon Cyprian Gleed. Naturally so. There was no love lost between him and his mother; he was an irresponsible, amoral and possibly violent character; he needed money badly, but his mother had refused to give him any more until his next allowance was due. Wright had discovered, furthermore, that Gleed was being pressed hard by several creditors for payment of quite considerable sums. So far, so good. But house-to-house inquiries, both in Angel Street and the vicinity of Gleed's flat, together with the usual appeals to taxi drivers, etc , had so far turned up no trace of evidence that Gleed had left his flat between 4:30 and 7 P.M. on the night of the murder.

Repeated questioning had done nothing to shake the alibis, such as they were, of the other suspects: they had not, any of them, materially modified the evidence given in their original statements, nor contradicted themselves over matters of detail.

It seemed almost certain to Wright that the murderer must have brought a bag with him in which to take away the weapon and his bloodstained clothing. The question was, when did he remove the bag from the building? It could have been done either (a) immediately after the murder, or (b) at some time during the weekend by anyone who had a key to the side door; it would have been quite safe to leave the bag overnight, since the office part of the building was empty from Friday evening till Monday morning. Inspector Wright's research into this postulated piece of luggage had yielded the following results:

Stephen Protheroe had brought a kit bag into the office on Friday morning Miss Sanders noticed he was carrying it when he left the office at 5.20

P.M The Hampshire friends, with whom he stayed the weekend, said it was his first visit and confirmed that he had brought a kit bag, of the same color and size. Moreover, his host had been chatting with him in the bedroom when he unpacked it: Stephen had thrown the contents onto the bed—an unthinkable thing to do if they included bloodstained clothing and weapon

Basil Ryle. Nobody had seen him with a bag that Friday. On the other hand, no one could swear he had not brought one to the office, and it might easily have been hidden in his room. He had walked across Hungerford Bridge to the Festival Hall, he *could* have checked a bag in at a cloakroom there, before dinner, but there was no evidence that he had done so.

Liz Wenham was definitely not carrying a bag when she came to the cocktail party in Chelsea Her taxi driver had been traced, and stated that she had no luggage with her when she entered his cab in the Strand shortly after 5.30. They had not stopped anywhere on the way to Chelsea.

There remained *Arthur Geraldine.* His wife said that she had heard him come into the flat at about ten to six. He had gone straight to the bedroom, bathed and changed—his normal custom. He *could* have taken off bloodstained clothes then and concealed them, but it would have been a risky proceeding. He was his usual self at dinner, so Mrs Geraldine said.

As to the weekend, the situation was even more open. Arthur Geraldine, for instance, had worked at home on the Saturday morning, then gone for a spin with his wife to Richmond. The garage attendant stated that Mr. Geraldine was carrying no bag when he arrived to fetch the car. The whereabouts of Miss Wenham and Mr. Ryle could not be corroborated for the whole of Saturday and Sunday. Stephen Protheroe had unquestionably been in Hampshire. Cyprian Gleed's drunken progress would be almost impossible to trace from beginning to end.

But Inspector Wright was now skeptical of the theory that the murderer had gone back to retrieve a bag during the weekend. Angel Street would be much quieter then, and he would run a greater risk of being noticed letting himself in at the side door. Also, he could not be sure that Mr. and Mrs. Geraldine, or their maid, might not be going out when he entered.

"So we're back in the bosom of dear old Mother Thames," said Wright, raising his eyebrows interrogatively at Nigel.

"I see. Yes It looks the best bet. Not the Embankment, though "

"Not unless he lost his head and tried to get rid of it as soon as possible. No Hungerford Bridge. I took a stroll across it last night in the rush hour. Plenty of people hurrying over to catch trains at Waterloo. Like a crowd of sheep, these commuters—never notice anything—just want to get back to the little woman and the telly As you walk over the bridge south, there are

small arc lights on the girders above you, to your right. Your left side is in shadow. You hold the bag over the rail with your left hand and just let go, without stopping walking; or you stop a moment to admire the beautiful reflections of light on the water. It's just too easy There are trains rumbling over the bridge almost every minute during the rush hour. Drown the splash. Good-by to the evidence. Of course, you'd have to weight the bag to make sure it sank. So it'd have to be a pretty strong one, or it'd burst on hitting the water. But no doubt he'd give his mind to a little problem like that."

"You'll drag the river? At low tide? Or use frogmen?"

"It's being done. But the tides are fierce. Bag's halfway to Tilbury by now, I should think. Scuttling along the river bed."

"Well, if you're right, it narrows down the suspects a bit."

"Yes. Protheroe and Ryle both walked over the bridge between 5:25 and 6:15."

"And told us, without any hesitation, that they'd done so."

"Exactly. Whereas your engaging boy friend, Cyprian Gleed, *says* he was at home waiting for his mum to turn up, but *could* have been prancing about on the bridge."

"Are you issuing an appeal to the public?"

"Yes It'll be in the evening broadcasts, and in tomorrow's papers. And the wires'll be red-hot with people ringing up to say they thought they might have seen a man or heard a splash or something. But as for identification—I ask you! Turn facing the river, lean over the rail, and the lights are behind you, your face is in shadow. Height, sex, and possibly clothing—that's all anyone could see. But these commuters wouldn't notice if you threw an elephant over."

Nigel now gave Inspector Wright a summary of his own operations over the last thirty-six hours. The trap he had laid at dinner with Arthur Geraldine and the others had remained unsprung. no attempt had been made to steal the typescript of Millicent Miles' autobiography—not that it would have benefited the murderer, in fact, to do so, for there were photostat copies of the relevant pages at Scotland Yard Cyprian Gleed's interest in the book, however, gave Wright food for thought, and he made Nigel repeat the whole of their conversation.

"So he wanted to know about his mother's estate—the legal aspects," commented Wright thoughtfully. "And he said there was no question of him not being the next of kin, because, though she'd had a love affair as a girl, there'd been no child by it. That's rather significant, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"It suggests that Gleed doesn't realize that, even if she had had a child then, it couldn't be next-of-kin—bastards don't inherit where there is a legitimate child."

"All this is assuming she had a child *and* it was illegitimate." Nigel went on to tell Wright of his discoveries about Arthur Geraldine—Wright did not appear much interested in these—and the existence of a Paul Protheroe who had died in the Ulombo barracks.

"General Thoresby is having his army record looked up for me, and I've got a chap at Somerset House searching the records of births for 1926. He's going to ring me here if he finds anything before eleven o'clock."

"Protheroe's not all that uncommon a name."

"No. But if she had a child, and Stephen Protheroe was its father, we at last get a link between the murder and the tampering with Thoresby's book."

"You mean, either Protheroe, or Miss Miles, or both of them together, fiddled with the proof copy, knowing the boy had been killed at Ulombo—?"

"Exactly. But it was Protheroe, I'd say, who did the fiddling He'd want Blair-Chatterley exposed, to avenge the death of his son, caused by Blair-Chatterley's incompetence. Miss Miles discovers he has tampered with the proof, threatens to tell on him to the partners; he kills her to safeguard his job."

Nigel enlarged upon his theory with considerable excitement. When he had finished, Wright sat back scrutinizing him, head cocked like a bird over a wormcast.

"Well, well. It's all very pretty. On paper. And you believe Protheroe is capable of murder? *That* sort of murder?"

Nigel was spared answering this uncomfortable question by the ringing of the Inspector's telephone.

"For you. Somerset House."

Nigel took the receiver, listened intently for a minute.

"Hold on," he said; then, to Wright, "A child was born on November 9, 1926, at Greengarth in Northumberland. Paul Protheroe. Names of parents on birth certificate—Stephen Protheroe and Millicent Protheroe. And it *is* the Paul Protheroe who was killed at Ulombo: date of death fits. Any questions?"

"Ask him to search for record of a marriage between Protheroe and Millicent Miles. And ask him if anyone else has been making similar inquiries—within the last six months, say."

Nigel passed on these requests, thanked his informant and replaced the

receiver Inspector Wright, who could never keep still for long, was doing a tap dance with his fingers on the desk.

"Well, it's your pigeon," he said "You're investigating that libel affair for the publishers, and now you've got a lead. Chase Stephen Protheroe over that as hard as you like. But lay off the murder angle, Mr. Strangeways. Frankly, I'm not with you there—we haven't a shred of evidence yet."

Ten minutes later, when Nigel arrived at Angel Street, Miriam Sanders told him that Miss Wenham wished to see him immediately. Deferring the showdown with Stephen Protheroe, he went to her room. It was sunny this morning. The light, striking in obliquely through the fine, tall window, enhanced a brightly colored design for a dust jacket lying on the work table and picked out the gold lettering on the spines of a uniform edition in the top shelf of a bookcase. It was less flattering to Liz Wenham's looks. Her gray hair, even her eyes, usually so animated, lacked luster today; the rosy-russet cheeks were sallower; she had the etiolated appearance of a fresh-air woman confined too long indoors.

"Ah, here you are," she greeted him, making it—as often she did—sound like "where have you been all this time?"

"You're looking a bit tired," said Nigel sympathetically.

"So would you be if you had to run this firm practically single-handed. Arthur's tied up with the libel business half the time. And Basil seems to have conked out completely—can't keep his mind on his work at all. Damn that woman! What I'd do without Stephen I just don't know."

"He's bearing up all right?"

"Stephen doesn't cave in. He's got backbone."

"Never?"

"I don't think he's missed a day, holidays apart, for ten years." She suddenly brandished a sheaf of papers in Nigel's face. "How many times have I told you to type the subscription orders in a separate—?"

"Yes, Miss Wenham. I'm sorry."

The secretary, who had entered silently, took the papers and fled from the room as if blown out of a wind tunnel.

"Silly girls! They're all flustered out of their wits. When *is* that Inspector of yours going to take himself off our necks?"

"When he's made an arrest, I suppose."

For an instant, there was a glaze of fear, or anxiety, over Liz Wenham's clear eyes.

"It's all nonsense," she roundly declared. "One of *us!* Quite preposterous Is the Inspector a shoe fetishist?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The other evening he came round to my house and started poking about in my shoe cupboard," said Liz with high indignation. "It's enough to turn *me* morbid."

"He was looking for galoshes, I expect."

"*Galoshes?* Gracious heavens, I've never worn such things in my life! Why galoshes?"

"The murderer wore a pair. To prevent his shoes getting wet," Nigel flatly replied.

"Oh yes, I remember you mentioned it at dinner. But does your Inspector really suppose that the—that whoever did it would just put the galoshes back in a cupboard? Piffle. What was I saying before that idiotic girl—?"

"You were saying that Stephen Protheroe hadn't missed a day for ten years. He doesn't look all that strong to me. Is he never ill?"

"He did have some sort of a breakdown about ten years ago—" Liz Wenham uttered the word "breakdown" in a markedly derogatory tone. "Away for a week or two But there's been no bother of that sort since."

"Overwork, was it?"

"Nobody breaks down from overwork. Some emotional trouble, I fancy." Liz Wenham's tone made it clear that she had little more sympathy for emotional troubles than for the breakdowns they caused.

"Would that have been in 1947?"

"I can't think what possible interest this can have for you. Still 1947? It was the year we published *The Buried Day*—that I do remember. Stephen was doing the editorial work on it. Held up production, you know, his being away." Liz leaned back and took a volume from the shelves behind her "Here we are. Yes, it was 1947."

Nigel now reminded Liz Wenham that she had asked to see him.

"Oh yes. Two things I wish you'd have a word with Basil; he's gone broody as I told you, I can't manage to get him out of it. Needs a tonic, I daresay. And what was all that talk the other night," she continued, glancing shrewdly at Nigel, "about Arthur's Rockingham set? You seem to have got under his skin, somehow."

"Do you mean the subject cropped up again after I left?"

"No But when you said something about a Rockingham mentioned in the Miles autobiography, I noticed that Arthur looked annoyed. No, after you'd gone—I should tell you quite frankly—Arthur raised the question of paying you off. We're very grateful to you for holding our hands through this police inquiry, but—"

"I do quite understand. There's the *Time to Fight* trouble to be cleared up, though."

"I thought you'd come to a dead end over that."

"I had. But yesterday I gathered some new information. I believe I know now *why* the proof was tampered with. And the 'why' points to the 'who.' "

At this point, Liz Wenham's telephone rang and she went into a clinch with the literary agent at the other end. It would evidently be a prolonged tussle, so Nigel got up and made his way to Basil Ryle's room.

The young man was in bad shape, no doubt of that—staring into vacancy and seeming, for a moment, not to recognize Nigel. His eyeballs, turning painfully to his visitor's face, moved as if they had lead weights on them.

"Sorry you're under the weather," said Nigel. "Couldn't you take a few days off?"

"How much longer is this going on, for God's sake?" said Ryle in a collapsed voice.

"The investigation? I've no idea."

"I didn't mean that."

"As long as you refuse to face up to reality," Nigel coolly said.

With his red hair tousled and dank, his defenseless face, Basil Ryle looked like a sick schoolboy.

"I've faced too much reality this last week, I never want to see it again."

"No you haven't. You're still trying to make excuses for the way she treated you, trying to pretend to yourself that she was the marvelous creature you once thought her. . . . No, listen to me. Do you know what you're really fretting about? Not the loss of her. The loss of your self-respect. Self-respect means a lot to a chap who's come up the hard way, as you have. And yours was too much involved in your relationship with her. When she turned on you and showed herself up in her true colors, she dealt a mortal blow at *your* ego. She falsified all the familiar landmarks of your relationship, so of course you were lost. If she is not she, who on earth am I? It's a disintegrating experience, to feel like that. And ever since, you've been trying to recreate your illusion of her, because it's the only way you know to restore your self-esteem and recreate your self."

"I expect you're right," Basil pathetically murmured.

"But it's all wrong! You can't rebuild your life on an illusion. It gives way beneath you all the time That's why you're in this wretched state now—it'll turn neurotic if you aren't careful. You've got to accept it that you were a fool, and she was—well, what she was. Stare *that* in the face for a while, and you'll be cured"

Basil Ryle lifted his lugubrious, red-rimmed eyes. "My God, I was a bloody fool all right! I ought to be—"

"O.K. O.K. Face it, but don't wallow in it. Self-disgust is a good stimulant but a bad habit."

"Sententious bastard, aren't you?" said Ryle, but smiling for the first time "Funny, I didn't much take to you when we met—ten days ago, was it?—time's been no object since—" His voice trailed away, and the look of being saturated in misery returned to his face.

"Do you believe in brainstorms?" he asked.

"People have them."

Making a great effort, as if dragging out the words against their own will, Basil Ryle said, "That's what terrifies me—that I may have done it myself. . . . I could have *killed* her, the night before; I ran out of her house so that I wouldn't lay hands on her. I was in an absolute muck sweat. How do I know I didn't have a brainstorm the next night? All I remember is sitting here, in a daze of misery, humiliation, fury, and then going off to try and soothe my savage breast at the Festival Hall."

"Now do pull yourself together. I doubt if you're a schizophrenic Even if you are, and could have killed her in what you call a 'brainstorm,' you certainly wouldn't have planned everything ahead, as it was planned. This was a premeditated crime, thought out in every detail "

"Thank God for that!—Well, you see what I mean. You've certainly taken a load off my mind."

"You couldn't have killed Millicent Miles *in a brainstorm,*" said Nigel, gazing straightly at Basil Ryle.

"Yes, I realize that now. . . . Oh, I see. I'm not a madman but I may be a fiend?" Ryle laughed unconvincingly. "You're a disturbing chap, aren't you? Only the other night you were saying the scene I had with Millicent pointed to my innocence."

"It could point two ways, like most things. A subtle murderer might go to her house and deliberately provoke the scene—we've only your word for what happened, and you had the ideal supporting cast—a nosy German girl who could overhear a quarrel, but couldn't understand English. So the policemen reason, if he was going to kill her, he'd have killed her then, under intolerable provocation; but he didn't; therefore he's not likely to have killed her the next day."

"That's all too subtle for me," said Ryle; then, with sudden, half-humorous pugnacity, "Now for God's sake run away and talk to somebody else I've got work to do."

Thoughtfully, Nigel made his way along the passage toward the stairs There was something at the back of his mind, just out of reach; it would have to wait, whatever it was; for there remained the more pressing problem

of Arthur Geraldine to be cleared up, and Nigel did not know how best he could deal with it. He realized, too, that he was postponing the showdown with Stephen Protheroe. The worst thing about his job, which he found continuously absorbing, was that he got to like so many of the people it brought him in contact with. And some of them were murderers And murderers, by and large, tended to be less abominable than their crimes.

At the foot of the stairs he turned round again and marched resolutely back toward Arthur Geraldine's room. Carefully modulated aggressiveness should be the note. Now look here, Geraldine, do you or don't you want this proof-copy problem solved? Miss Wenham tells me you don't wish to avail yourself of my services any longer. Very well. But the problem of the proof copy is now all but solved, and I presume you would still care to know the identity of the miscreant. What has hampered my investigations throughout is the refusal of certain persons to admit that they knew Miss Miles in the past—two persons, Geraldine, of whom you are one.

Rehearsing this agreeably theatrical speech brought Nigel to the senior partner's door. As he opened it, he was almost driven back by a cloud of smoke and a wave of stuffy warmth The room, he soon deduced, was not on fire—or, if it was, the persons sitting at the long table were taking it remarkably calmly: six prepossessing young gentlemen, equally distinguished in dress and in feature, all smoking away like fury. Nigel's catarrh and sinus trouble had deprived him of his sense of smell. At the head of the table, Arthur Geraldine looked round.

"Oh, good morning, Strangeways. Anything urgent? I've got this travelers' meeting till lunch. I don't think you've met these gentlemen " Courteous as ever, Geraldine performed introductions, the six distinguished-looking persons rising to their feet as one man, and greeting Nigel in turn with a "Good morning, sir"—a ceremony somewhat marred by Liz Wenham, who breezed in at that moment, exclaimed "My God, what an appalling fug!" and threw open the nearest window

From the foot of the long table, Stephen Protheroe winked at Nigel.

"These gentlemen," pronounced the senior partner with considerable grandeur, "are the spearhead of the firm's fortunes—our panzer brigade. They not only travel hopefully, they also arrive."

A gratified murmur from the panzer brigade greeted this trope, and they sat down again as one man. Overcome by a mounting sense of unreality, Nigel made his excuses and left the conference. Arthur Geraldine's public manner was so different from his easy, unbuttoned private one. Climbing the stairs, Nigel reflected upon the paradoxical Anglo-Irish alternations of

boisterousness and ceremoniousness, hauteur and horseplay, glibness and reticence.

Alone in Stephen Protheroe's room, he flipped through a few papers, stared out of the window, glanced in at the room where Millicent Miles had met her death, empty now except for the table and one chair. It was odd to think of her and Stephen working next door to each other all those weeks, with nothing between them but a sliding window and a dead bastard. Or had Paul Protheroe been legitimized? Nigel rang Somerset House. After a few minutes' delay his friend came to the telephone· no, there was no record of a marriage between Stephen Protheroe and Millicent Miles, either before or after Paul Protheroe's birth. Whoever had registered the birth must have given a false name for the child's mother, in the interests of respectability; unless, of course, there had been two Millicents in Stephen's past—a possibility too discouraging to contemplate. As far as Nigel's informant knew, there had been no other inquiries recently about this birth certificate.

At a loose end now, Nigel began to poke about in the drawers of Stephen Protheroe's desk. One of them was locked Unable to find a key in any of the other drawers, Nigel set to work and picked the lock. Presumably the police had searched this desk some days ago; yet Nigel felt a certain tension as he worked. The drawer did not contain a razor, galoshes, bloodstained clothing. But it was not empty: Nigel saw a litter of paper—loose sheets, some of them yellowish with age, all of them dusty. He took them out. Beneath them he found a book· it was *Fire and Ash,* the poet Protheroe's only living child.

There had been many other children, though—born dead or strangled at birth, weaklings, monstrosities. The loose papers under which *Fire and Ash* was buried proved to be work sheets of poems It did not take Nigel long to discover that they were unpublished poems, not earlier versions of those which had appeared in *Fire and Ash.* They were undated; but it seems probable they had been composed after the publication of that book—why should Stephen preserve juvenilia written before 1927?

As he studied the work sheets, Nigel had a recurrence of the feeling experienced in Cyprian Gleed's flat—a feeling compounded of pity, embarrassment and shuddering distaste; the drawer from which he had taken these sheets was a mausoleum of dead ends There were dozens and dozens of poems, hatched and cross-hatched with alternatives in Stephen's neat, spidery writing, and not a single one of them was finished The emotional conflagration which had produced his masterpiece must have suffocated Stephen's genius beneath the weight of its own ashes. These manuscript

poems were lifeless For all his technical skill, Stephen had been unable to infuse them with even the similitude of life. Nigel imagined him beginning each new one with ever-diminishing confidence, working his way painfully toward some half-glimpsed objective, then losing sight of it, losing touch, losing interest.

Replacing the pitiable fragments in the drawer, Nigel turned with relief to *Fire and Ash.* It was not the first time he had reread it during the last ten days, but it had lost none of its impact through familiarity. lines rose up again and jolted him under the heart with sickening violence and precision. A raw, harsh work, tracing a man's love for a woman through all the stages from passionate faith to savage disillusionment—critics had compared it, when first it was published, to *Modern Love*—this sequence moved, without pity or self-pity, to its tragic close. Great images of love and lust, of innocence, betrayal, hatred and despair flared up from the pages, shedding a light ever colder and more relentless upon the human situation, so that the man and woman in the poem were dwarfed by the lengthening shadows of their destiny.

Nigel closed the book, put it back, and locked the drawer. A quarter of an hour later, when Stephen Protheroe returned from the conference, Nigel stared at him for a few moments, as if he could not recognize in this shrimp of a man the creator of that merciless, passionate masterpiece, *Fire and Ash.*

"Anything wrong?"

"We've got to have a talk," said Nigel. "About Paul Protheroe."

XIII *TRANSPOSE*

Stephen Protheroe's reaction was not what Nigel might have expected. After regarding Nigel meditatively for a few seconds, he gave a little, sad, abstracted smile, and said, "Ah well, I suppose it had to come out."

"Paul was your son, by Millicent Miles."

"No, no, you've got it all wrong."

"But it's registered at Somerset House—"

"I know. . . . Look here, let's go and have something to eat. I can't confess on an empty stomach." There was a glint of mischief in Stephen's eyes. He refused Nigel's invitation to a restaurant, saying that such places gave him claustrophobia. "Come back to my flat and I'll run you up an omelet." Then, as Nigel hesitated, "I'm a tolerable plain cook. And if you don't care to eat a man's salt when you're accusing him of a dark deed," added Stephen with a grin, "you can damn well eat your omelet without salt."

There was no refusing this. Stephen Protheroe appeared to have taken control. In the taxi, as though Nigel must be relieved of any embarrassment, Stephen gave a droll account of the travelers' meeting; he showed no sign of awkwardness, let alone guilt, indeed, he was more vivacious than Nigel had ever known him—from relief, perhaps, that he would at last be unburdening himself of his secret.

Nevertheless, when they were in the neat little Holborn flat, Nigel did not let his host out of his sight. He had no intention of being caught napping. There were other weapons than razors, and poison was one of them, absurd as it seemed now to connect the amiable Stephen with such things. Nigel followed him into the kitchen, saying,

"Do you mind? I'm everlastingly curious about the way other people live."

Stephen Protheroe lived, it was at once plain, with remarkable efficiency. His kitchen was spotless, well equipped with labor-saving units, everything in punctilious order and ready to hand. Stephen himself set about preparing the meal with a concentration that won Nigel's approval. Breaking the eggs, he said over his shoulder,

"You'll find some wine in the cupboard by the door. Let's have a bottle of hock. Run the cold tap over it for a bit, will you—not what the pundits

would approve, but I haven't an ice bucket. Corkscrew in the left-hand drawer of the dresser."

Nigel followed the instructions, still keeping his eye upon Stephen, who seemed much too absorbed in his work to notice that he was being watched.

"I must say you've got a high-class *cuisine,*" Nigel remarked.

"Well, I like looking after myself and I enjoy cooking. After Paul was killed, I was able to launch out and indulge myself a bit." The surprising little man turned round, handing Nigel his omelet on a plate. "This won't poison you, at any rate. Go and eat it while it's hot. Through there. You'll find the table laid. I'll bring in the wine and some bread and butter."

The sitting room too was scrupulously tidy. There was a place laid for one at the round table, and a vase of freesias on the mantelpiece; comfortable armchairs, long low bookshelves painted white, a reading stand, a crimson carpet, a Matthew Smith blazing with color over the fireplace.

Nigel strolled across and examined two photographs on the mantelpiece. a small boy riding a tricycle, and a young man in military uniform.

"Yes, that's Paul," said Stephen, who had entered silently. "Do come and eat your omelet. Unless you prefer it leathery."

Meekly, Nigel sat down and began, while Stephen set a place for himself and poured out the wine.

"Your health," said Stephen. "How's the sinus trouble?"

"Not much better, I'm afraid."

"Salt?" Stephen's voice, at its most resonant, made a challenge of the word; his fine eyes held Nigel's.

"Thank you, I will. Without prejudice."

Not till they had eaten the second course—fresh fruit from a bowl of Italian pottery—was the subject in both their minds mentioned. Nigel had his own reasons for wanting Stephen to introduce it again; but Stephen seemed in no hurry to do so, preferring to talk about his flat, of which he was pleasantly proud—he was so comfortable here, he said, and enjoyed his own company so well, that he very seldom went away. "Solitude suits me Solitude in a crowd," he added, with a gesture toward the enveloping city. "Are you married?"

"I was. My wife is dead."

"I like women But I don't want them around all the time; they demand too much attention, and what's worse, they pay one too much—you know, watching every expression that passes over one's face—is he getting tired of me? Or is it just a twinge of his indigestion?"

Nigel laughed. "You never thought of marrying Millicent Miles then?"

"Great Scott, no! Even at the time, she made me sick"

"At the time when she had your child?"

Stephen shot him a swift look, then motioned him to one of the armchairs. "Coffee for you?"

"No thanks."

"Well, let's get started." Stephen rubbed his hands briskly. "Tell me how you discovered about Paul."

"I got the impression early on that there was some long-standing relationship between you and Miss Miles. Then her autobiography spoke of a love affair she'd had, at nineteen, with a man who subsequently deserted her."

Stephen drew in a sharp breath, as if he had been stabbed, and his face contorted. "*Deserted* her!" he exclaimed. "Never mind. Go on."

"She apparently told Ryle that she'd been seduced when a girl, and had a still-born baby."

Stephen looked puzzled. "But is there a reference in the autobiography to her having a child?"

"Not exactly. Reading between the lines, though—" Nigel broke off. This passage had to be handled with the utmost delicacy. If Stephen was the murderer, it was he who had substituted at the end of the chapter the page which stated that Millicent had not had a child by her early lover, and if this were so, Nigel's disregarding the information given by this page would show Stephen that Nigel believed it to be a fake, and put him on his guard. On the other hand—still assuming that Stephen had committed the murder—he could not, without betraying himself, reveal his knowledge of the substituted page.

"I was trying to find a motive for the stetting of the libelous passages in *Time to Fight,*" Nigel resumed. "It had clearly been done in order to damage either the publishers or the author or General Blair-Chatterley. I couldn't find any adequate reason for anyone wanting to damage General Thoresby or your firm, and I was totally bogged down. Then, after I read the autobiography, it occurred to me that, if Miss Miles *did* have a child in 1926, it would be twenty-one in 1947—the year of the massacre at the Ulombo barracks. I rang General Thoresby and asked him to look through the casualty list. One of the names on it was Paul Protheroe. Somerset House did the rest."

"I see. Yes" Stephen seemed to lapse into abstraction

"And today Miss Wenham told me that you'd had some sort of a breakdown in 1947," said Nigel gently. "The shock of your son's death—"

"*Oh, but Paul wasn't my son*" Stephen's face was averted.

Nigel stared at him "What? But the records at Somerset House—"

"Damn Somerset House!" Stephen got to his feet, gazed for a moment at

the photograph of the child on a tricycle, then went over and sat by the window "It wasn't my secret," he slowly began. "That's why I've been keeping my mouth shut And then, of course, I didn't know what sort of trouble I might get into if it was found out that I'd made a false registration."

"Of Paul's birth?"

"Yes. But I'd better tell you the story from the beginning. I did meet Millicent years ago, when she was seventeen or eighteen. Quite by chance. In a bookshop at Wimblesham. Is that referred to in her book?"

"Yes. But she doesn't give your name—just mentions a man who encouraged her in her literary efforts. She calls him 'Rockingham'—a verbal association with another man she'd met about the same time."

Stephen Protheroe leaned back on the window seat, relaxing a little. "She had talent then, of a sort. I was too young to realize that her heart was made of—of synthetic rubber. Well, I had a brother. Peter was two years younger than myself, and I'd always been protective and auntyish toward him. In 1925 he was at a theological college in Oxford, training for the ministry, and I was struggling along with free-lance literary journalism. During the vacations, Peter used to share my rooms in London. Millicent turned up one day to ask my advice about a story, and she met him there. That's how it all started."

"You mean, Paul was your brother's child?"

"Exactly. Peter was a fine young chap He had a very strong sense of vocation—and the passionate nature that so often goes with it He was also, as far as women went, totally inexperienced, repressed, absurdly romantic—the ideal prey for a girl like Millicent. No doubt she had a tough struggle with his religious convictions—she'd have enjoyed that—but she succeeded in seducing him."

The sad anger on Stephen's face deepened, and he pounded the window-seat cushion with his fist.

"You'll see before long why I loathed that woman. Peter came back for the Easter vacation the next year in a terrible state He hadn't dared to write to me about it, but I soon got it out of him. Millicent was two months pregnant, and threatening to expose him to his college authorities."

"If he didn't marry her?"

"Worse. If he didn't procure an abortion for her. He told me she'd been working on his nerves like a fiend. I could see it. he shuddered with disgust when he talked about her But the practical problem seemed insoluble Exposure would mean the end of his career, his vocation Naturally, he would not entertain the idea of an abortion Marriage, even if she could be

brought to accept it, would mean tying himself for life to a woman whose nature he had plumbed deeply enough already. And besides, he couldn't begin to afford it financially: he was scraping through college on a legacy, our mother was then a widow, living on a small annuity."

Lighting a cigarette, Stephen puffed at it jerkily as he went on.

"Well, I hope I never have to live through anything like that April again. Peter was in a turmoil of panic, guilt and disgust. He'd fallen deeply in love with Millicent, only to discover that he'd fallen into a—a pit of—you don't know how a woman like her can *flay* a decent man. Peter was near suicide. She'd turned his love into an abomination, and then flung it back in his face —that's how he felt it."

"And that's how you came to write *Fire and Ash?*"

Stephen's head turned sharply toward Nigel. "Oh, you've read it? Yes. I started writing it then, to keep myself sane. Millicent never forgave me for that book—it penetrated even her thick hide."

Comprehension dawned on Nigel's face. "So she had a really strong motive for tampering with the proof copy of *Time to Fight.* I never thought your opposing the reprint of her novels was a strong enough one She did it to get her own back for *Fire and Ash.* I suppose she thought you'd be bound to be held responsible for the stet marks. Or was she threatening to tell the partners that she had actually seen you doing it?"

"I've no notion what was in her mind," replied Stephen with some impatience. "There's no *proof* it was she who did the stetting, is there? If she did, you can dismiss any idea that she did it to expose Blair-Chatterley and avenge Paul, anyway."

"Why?"

"Because she never cared a damn what happened to Paul," Stephen bitterly replied. "As far as she was concerned, Paul never existed. That was part of the bargain."

"The bargain?"

"Yes I went to see her. A fortnight after Peter had told me about it all. Thought I could plead with her, soften her somehow—I was nearly as ignorant and idealistic a young ass as Peter. I met her several times that month. Not at her home, of course; A.B C. shops—that sort of place. It taught me a lot about women. She was only nineteen, but by God she knew all the tricks Innocence betrayed, pathos, indignation, panic, evasiveness, the brave face—she tried everything. Well, I finally got her to realize that she could expect nothing more from Peter I made her a proposition then—said I'd arrange for the child to be born up in the North, pay for everything, go up there with her, pretend to be her husband, and take the child off her

hands She made up some story for her parents that a London doctor had told her she'd got T.B. and a friend had offered to pay for treatment at a sanatorium. They seem to have accepted it. She was the most accomplished liar I've ever met, even at that age."

Stephen Protheroe fell silent. The brooding look on his face, in profile against the window, reminded Nigel of that time, over a week ago, when he and Stephen had talked about disinterestedness. "Perhaps we have lost what the word means," he had said. Well, Stephen had done one purely disinterested action in his life. He began to say this now, but Stephen cut in harshly.

"And a hell of a lot of use it was. It didn't take the load off Peter's conscience. He went into the missionary field and died of a tropical fever two years later in some God-forsaken place."

"And the boy? Paul? You looked after him?"

"Nobody else was going to." Stephen went off at a tangent. "Millicent's flair for evading responsibility was incredible Of course, as I said, it was part of the bargain that I should take him off her hands. But she'd hardly given birth to him before she contrived somehow to dissociate herself from him entirely."

"Ah. The word Mrs. Blayne used."

"Who's she?"

Nigel explained.

"Did Millicent confide in her?"

"Not about the baby. But she told me that, even as a girl, Millicent could dissociate herself from her own mistakes, etc.—pretend they'd never happened, and take herself in quite successfully."

"Yes. I remember, when she was suckling the child—she had to do it for a bit till I found a wet nurse—she looked utterly detached from him, as though she was doing a favor to somebody else's baby. It was quite absurd, I couldn't help laughing once She hated being laughed at. Humorless girl When I told her why, she positively glared at me. 'I never wanted this creature,' she said, 'I never want to see or hear of it again, and I'm starting now.' "

"And did she?"

"Did she what?"

"Ever see or hear of Paul again?"

"No She turned the whole episode into a bad dream. And I'd no desire to keep in touch with her."

"Not even when he was killed?"

"No. Paul was told his mother had died in childbirth. He accepted me as his father."

"But when Miss Miles turned up here—?"

"That was an exceedingly unpleasant reunion for us both."

"But surely you told her about Paul then?"

"Oh, I see, yes The subject did come up presently She had the infernal nerve to ask me how my son was. *My* son! I told her he'd been killed in action ten years ago."

"How did she take that?"

Stephen Protheroe grimaced, gave one of his volcanic sniffs.

"It was unbelievable. She went straight into a bereaved-mother routine. Why had I kept Paul from her? Why had I allowed him to get killed? I just saw red—went for her good and hard."

"That must have been the quarrel Jean heard. When Miss Miles called you 'Goggles.' Which reminds me that Susan—"

"You can understand why I didn't tell you all this before. Paul wasn't my secret alone."

Nigel rose to look at the photograph again "There's a likeness to his mother."

"It was only physical, thank heaven."

"You became very fond of him?"

Stephen nodded. His face, from the noble brow to the small receding chin, looked suddenly smaller; the lips quivered for a moment. "After a bit I began to feel as if I was his father He was a lovable little chap. Quiet and serious, like my brother, with plenty of fire behind it."

Stephen went on to tell Nigel how the baby Paul had been entrusted to foster parents—a Greengarth farmer and his wife, whom he himself had known from boyhood. He visited the farm from time to time, and later paid for the boy's education at a small public school It was to support Paul that he had taken the job with Wenham & Geraldine in 1930, for his freelance literary work was still not bringing in enough money. The farmer had offered later to adopt the boy, but Stephen felt it as a duty to his brother's memory that Paul should be "kept in the family." Paul had shown, as he grew older, an unusual aptitude with animals, and Stephen had been saving up to buy him a small farm when he came out of the army. But he never came out alive; so the money was spent, some of it, on the creature comforts with which Stephen was now surrounded. And a pretty poor substitute they must be, thought Nigel, for that promising nephew and all he had meant to Stephen.

"You realize," said Nigel, "that the police may inquire into all this? Is there anyone who can corroborate your story?"

The farmer and his wife were still alive. To protect his brother, Stephen had told them he was the child's father and that its mother had left him shortly after the baby was born. How far they had believed this fiction he never knew; but they agreed to tell Paul, when he asked, that his mother was dead. Nigel was welcome to their name and address. Other confirmation there could be none, for the whole affair had been conducted with the utmost possible secrecy. Stephen and Millicent had lived together in rooms at Greengarth for several months before the child was born, as man and wife. In view of Millicent's condition, they occupied separate bedrooms. It had been a protracted and grisly farce, keeping up the pretense.

"But you see," Stephen concluded, "you've only my word for much of this. I'm quite certain Peter never confided in anyone else."

"Was he alone when he died?"

Stephen looked puzzled for a moment. Then he said, "Oh, a deathbed confession? I see. Well, the C E M.S. might be able to help there. But I doubt it By the time they'd got Peter back into the hospital, he was in a coma, and never spoke again. His Bishop wrote and told us that, when they sent home Peter's belongings."

Nigel took down the few names which Stephen could provide, but not hopefully The threads of this story, as of so much else in the case, went too far back into the past, and the most important ones were broken—Millicent and her parents were dead, Peter Protheroe was dead, Paul was dead.

Nor was Nigel disposed to doubt Stephen's account of his relationship with Millicent. Unfortunately this account gave no solid ground for a further step in the investigation of the *Time to Fight* problem. However fond of his nephew Stephen had grown, it was not very likely that he should have tampered with the proof copy, nearly ten years after Paul's death, to expose the Governor whose ineptitude had caused it. Yet it seemed even more improbable now that Miss Miles had been the culprit. She had wished never to see or hear of Paul again.

"There are some people," said Stephen, as if he had read Nigel's thoughts, "who create the maximum nuisance, in any way that lies to hand, simply because they *must* assert themselves. They are the truly irresponsible ones."

"You're thinking of Millicent Miles?"

"Yes. And the same goes for Cyprian Gleed, I'd say."

"Both of them vindictive characters."

Stephen considered the word. "Malicious, perhaps, rather than vindictive."

"Millicent Miles hated you," Nigel reflectively continued.

"You knew of a shady episode in her past. You told her exactly what you though of her. You opposed the reissuing of her novels. She could have stetted those libelous passages, on an impulse, with a vague idea of getting you into trouble—and, of course, getting her own back on the author for ragging her in the mess. Several smallish motives adding up to quite a big one. Yes, it's in character."

"But you don't feel confident about it?"

Nigel soon rose to go. If Stephen was the big fish for whom he was angling—and it seemed wildly improbable now—the bait had not been taken. Not even a nibble.

XIV *WRONG FONT*

"I'm afraid this isn't a very convenient time, my dear fellow I'm up to my neck in—" Arthur Geraldine gestured toward the neat piles of papers on his desk. The senior partner's tone was pleasant enough, but his gray eyes had a chill on them.

"I'm sorry," said Nigel, "but there's something I must clear up. It really can't wait any longer."

Geraldine sat back, stretching out his arms in front of him, the strong, hairy hands, clenched into fists, resting on the desk.

"Very well then. What is it?"

"Why did you tell me you'd never met Miss Miles till your firm took her over?"

Arthur Geraldine's eyes went chillier still. "I don't like your tone, Strangeways May I remind you that you are, temporarily, an employee of my firm?"

Ignoring the frigid rebuke, Nigel went on, "Miss Miles told me that she had met you many years ago, under rather peculiar circumstances." He refrained from mentioning her remark that Geraldine "always was a weak man."

"I don't recollect it. But it's perfectly possible. I've met a good many people in my life."

"Isn't it rather odd that she never reminded you of this meeting?"

Geraldine shrugged, but there was a watchful look on his face now.

"Didn't she remind you of it?" Nigel persisted.

Geraldine's long, thin mouth stretched tighter. "Are you suggesting I'm a liar?"

"There's no use stone-walling with me, Mr. Geraldine. I have evidence that, when you were a representative of the *Daily Sun,* you bought a Rockingham dinner service from Miss Miles' parents in Wimblesham."

A flush spread slowly over the large brow and bald head. "Yes, I did acquire the Rockingham set there, I remember. But I'd no idea it was her parents who—"

The door opened, and Stephen Protheroe trotted in. "You left this behind," he said, handing Nigel a bottle of nose drops

"Oh, many thanks." Nigel absently set down the bottle on Arthur Ger-

aldine's desk, as Stephen went out again. "Did you actually meet Miss Miles when you visited her parents' house? She was a schoolgirl then."

"Ah now, how could I possibly remember that? It was over thirty years ago." Geraldine almost crooned it. He had the Irishman's gift for fluent changes of front; he was all affability and helpfulness now.

"Miss Miles remembered it all right. Well enough to mention in her autobiography a man she met at that period and gives the pseudonym of Rockingham." Nigel slid smoothly off this very thin ice. "Did you go to the house often?"

"Twice at least, I think. It's beginning to come back, you know. I do seem to remember a girl there—a toothy, intense creature—do you tell me that was Millicent Miles? Well, bless my soul!" Arthur Geraldine grinned like an amiable shark. "Yes, she was mad keen for her dad to take out a subscription to the paper, so she'd get a set of novels I was hawking round —one of those newspaper free-gift schemes to increase circulation."

"And did he?"

"No. I think he must have been on the rocks. Anyway, he told me to call again. The second time, his wife wasn't there. He asked me what I'd give him for the Rockingham set—I'd admired it on my first visit. I made him an offer, and he jumped at it. But I had to take the service away at once—before his wife returned, I suppose. I remember emptying my suitcase for it. I was carrying round some specimen sets of the novels. I said I'd come back for them the next day. There was a blinding row when I did. Mrs. Miles went for me like a fury But I had her husband's receipt for the money, so there was nothing she could do about it."

Arthur Geraldine's expression was almost ingratiating, as he added, "It's terribly shocking to look back on, I agree I fleeced the poor fellow. Collectors have no morality at all, you know. It's like a physical passion. You fall in love with some object, and you've got to have it. Besides, I hadn't much money myself those days."

Nigel meditated this remarkable statement. It was not the confession itself which was remarkable, but the fact that Geraldine should so gratuitously have made it. "And Miss Miles never brought this up, you say?"

"Never breathed it, I do assure you." Arthur Geraldine was positively beaming. "I see what's in your mind, my dear fellow. Blackmail, eh? It was a discreditable episode in my life, I'm not denying it You can see why I didn't want it to come out. But I'd not kill the poor woman in order to keep it hushed up."

Nigel agreed that this was, on the face of it, most unlikely. But why, he thought, have I been able to extract the rotten old stump so painlessly?

Geraldine showed no resistance, never challenged my sources of information. Is he flourishing before my eyes that deplorable episode of the Rockingham set, simply to conceal the existence of something far nastier behind it?

"You gave Miss Miles very favored treatment here," Nigel said to gain time. "I'd not have thought her a Wenham & Geraldine kind of author, anyway."

"Every publisher has to compromise between his literary standards and his pocket Besides, Basil Ryle was keen; he rather bounced us into taking her on."

"A singularly unfortunate decision," Nigel remarked dryly, "considering that she involved you in a libel action and then got murdered on the premises."

"What's that? You mean it was *she* who tampered with the proof copy? In God's name, why?"

"General mischievousness and particular malice. I know for a fact that she had private grudges against General Thoresby and Stephen Protheroe. It'd round it off nicely if she had a grudge against you, or Miss Wenham."

"I don't follow you."

"If, for example, she'd tried to blackmail you over the Rockingham set, what would you have done?"

"Told her to go to hell, of course. But—"

"Which would have given her a motive for damaging you through your firm."

"But I keep on telling you, she never referred to the blasted Rockingham, let alone—"

"Let alone anything else that happened when you visited her home in 1924?"

Geraldine's bald head flushed pink again. It could have been, of course, through the effort he was making to repress indignation and anger

"Will you please make yourself plain?" he said, in a constricted, dangerous tone. "I don't like innuendoes."

"The trouble with Miss Miles is that no one ever knew whether she was telling the truth or romancing."

"I asked you—"

"Yes She confided in a school friend that a man who came to her house, in the summer of 1924—a man with very thin lips—had attempted a criminal assault upon her. As a blackmailing card, a criminal assault on a schoolgirl, if there was other confirmation of it, would still be fairly potent, even after thirty years."

Nigel started, as the ruler which Geraldine was playing with snapped in half. "You're talking great nonsense," said Geraldine in a muffled voice. Nigel waited for more; but the senior partner, with a preoccupied look, took up a sheaf of papers from his desk. "I really must get on with my work now."

Going upstairs, Nigel sought out Stephen Protheroe again "Sorry to keep pestering you. It's just this. Mr. Miles went bankrupt in 1924 You met Millicent first in 1925, when she was working in the bookshop Did she ever invite you to her house?—she was still living at home then, I believe."

"Yes, I went there once or twice."

"They were very hard up still, presumably?"

"Not that you'd notice, no. I seem to remember getting the impression that Miles had fallen on his feet somehow."

"Miss Miles never discussed his financial affairs with you?"

"I don't think so Apart from a little self-dramatization as the struggling young genius who had to support her ruined parents."

"Which she could hardly do on her wages as a bookshop assistant."

"No. It was rather odd, I suppose Her father had been sacked by his firm, and I'm pretty sure he hadn't found another job when I first met her. But I really knew very little about that side of her life. We spent most of our time discussing Culture—or rather, Millicent's contribution to it. Young men are always flattered to have female disciples."

Arthur Geraldine's secretary came in. "You left this behind in Mr Geraldine's room, didn't you?" she said, handing him the bottle of nose drops

"Oh, thank you very much."

"You seem to be always leaving it about," said Stephen. "Put it in your pocket, for heaven's sake."

Nigel now told him that he wanted a few words with Susan Jones. Stephen rang the head of the invoice department, who said he would send her up in a few minutes.

"You want to talk to her privately?"

"Yes."

"Well, you'd better use the next room."

"I don't think that'd be quite—"

"Good heavens, man, it's not haunted, is it? They've cleaned it up," said Stephen irritably.

"Nevertheless, Susan might be a bit squeamish Could you ask Jean to clear out of the Reference Library for a bit?"

"Oh, I suppose so Heaven knows what she does there all day, anyway."

So Nigel's second meeting with the blonde bombshell took place at the

venue of his first. Susan was nervous, though, this time, and far less forthcoming.

"Do sit down, Susan. Jean said you wanted to see me about something. Sorry I've been so long getting round to it."

"I'm sure I don't know—" the girl began, tossing her head uneasily.

"Trouble with the boy friend? Just give the word, and I'll challenge him to a duel."

Susan smiled wanly. "You're in with the police, aren't you?"

"In trouble with them. Constantly. Why?"

"I've never had anything to do with that lot. You can't trust them, can you? Beating up prisoners and taking bribes and that. But it's really what my boy friend would say, see? He's refined."

"The one who reads books?"

"Who else?"

"Well then, what would he say about what?"

"Besides, Miss Wenham doesn't like it. She's ever so fierce on—"

"Miss *Wenham.* How does she come into this?"

"I'm telling you, aren't I? She doesn't like we girls going into the packers' room. But what I say is a girl wants to see a bit of life before she settles down."

"And the packers' room is the place to see it?"

Susan gave him an unexpectedly gamine glance. "You're telling *me!* Mind you, I wasn't doing any harm. But it might be mis—mis—"

"Misinterpreted?"

"Look what education does for you! You know, you remind me sometimes of David. That's my boy friend. My steady, I mean."

Nigel's almost limitless patience was nearing exhaustion. But, after several more diversions, he got Susan back onto the main road, to find himself amply rewarded. Last Friday night, she told him, she had a date with "one of the gentlemen in the packers' room." She left the Reference Library sharp at 5:30, went down in the lift, and entered the packers' room. All the other packers had departed by now, and her "date" took the opportunity of the room being empty to embark on some preliminary dalliance—this latter being Nigel's interpretation of Susan's coy statement that "we chatted awhile before going out." After about ten minutes, they turned off the one light still burning there, and opening the door Susan peeped cautiously out —cautiously, because they had just heard the lift gates closing, and because she had no business to be there, Miss Wenham disapproving of this sort of fraternization on the premises.

Susan peered out, then, into the passage which led past the lift, the foot

of the stairs and the reception-room door to the side door of the building The passage was lit at that time of the evening, as Nigel knew, by one low-powered bulb. The light was sufficient, however, to show Susan a man who was just going through the inner swing doors at the end of the passage toward the street door. She had only seen his back, and that for a moment only, but her description of him was clear enough as far as it went

"It was a fairly small man," she said. "He had one of those duffel coats on like the Teddy boys have started wearing. Biscuit-colored, I think And a dark hat with a wide brim. And he'd got sort of hair at the side of his face—he was turning just a little to get his bag through the swing door."

"What kind of a bag?"

"Well, you know, a grip bag. Must have been fair-sized and heavy, because he grunted a little getting through the door with it."

"Did Whatsisname—your packer friend—see this chap?"

"Oh no. There wasn't room only for me to look through the door."

"What did he think about it?"

"George? I didn't mention it to him I never thought anything of it at the time I mean, I thought it was just someone who'd been visiting one of the partners."

"And there was nothing familiar about this chap?"

"Ooh, he hadn't time to be familiar—I've told you—he was beetling out of the office."

"I mean, you didn't recognize him? His back view didn't remind you of anyone you know?"

"N-no" The girl's negative did not sound absolutely firm, but Nigel pressed her no further.

"What does George say about all this now?"

"Oh, I've not mentioned it to *him.* It's none of his business, is it?"

"In fact, you've not mentioned it to anyone?"

Susan, looking a little shamefaced, jerked one shoulder forward with a petulant movement. "Well, I've told you, haven't I?"

"But the police. They asked if anyone here had seen anything out-of-the-way last Friday evening."

"There's nothing out-of-the-way about a man leaving the building"

"Oh my dear Susan, why were you worried about it, then? Jean saw you had something on your mind."

"Now don't you start nattering at me! I've had enough worry— It's what I told you. I don't want my boy friend to hear about it, see? Or Miss Wenham."

"But you'll have to tell the police your story."

"It *isn't* a story!"

"Your account of what you saw."

"I'm not having anything to do with that lot. We're respectable people. My dad would tan me if I got mixed up with the police."

"Did you ever see Cyprian Gleed, Miss Miles' son, when he visited the office?"

"Not that I know of. What's he to do with it?"

Nigel rose to his feet, and Susan did the same.

"Look, Susan. Inspector Wright has got to be told about this. I can tell him myself; but it'd come far better from you. Why not get it over with at once?"

"He'll half murder me for—"

"He'll do nothing of the sort. The Inspector is a very nice man and a friend of mine. I'll ring him up to fix an interview. And I'll hold your hand while you talk to him."

Susan's expression showed that she did not take the last phrase figuratively. The languishing look was soon followed, however, by one of alarm.

"But will I have to give evidence in court? I reelly couldn't."

"You may not have to. It all depends. But if you do, you'll be the star witness for the Crown."

The word "star" evidently got home. Susan's huge blue eyes brightened. She saw herself in the witness box, switching on all her charm. And then there'd be the newspapers.

"Give my boy friend something worth reading about, wouldn't it?" she said with a giggle, taking up the dislocated stance favored by modern fashion models.

"You'll knock them cold," said Nigel, and reached for the telephone.

"I'd like to have put that blonde across my knees and given her a good hiding," declared Inspector Wright. "Here we've been, wasting a dozen men's time for a week, just because she chose to lock up this information in her silly little head."

It was nine o'clock on the same evening. Nigel had dined with Clare Massinger in her studio, and she was now making another pot of coffee for the Inspector, who had just dropped in. His long, sallow face looked gaunter than ever after the intensive labors of the last week, and the brightness in his eyes seemed almost feverish.

Clare poured him out a large cup of coffee and tipped some brandy into it, then curled herself up close to Nigel on the settee. Wright raised his cup to her. "Your health, Miss Massinger This'll save my life." He glanced

round the studio, nodded at an exhibit, and with one of his dazzlingly vivid pantomimic gestures sketched the movement of a sculptor's hands molding the clay. "How's the old slap-and-tickle going?"

"Mustn't grumble."

Clare and the Inspector enjoyed keeping up the fiction that he was a deplorably uncultivated person whose idea of art went no further than Highland cattle and indecent postcards. He teased her for a little on these lines, accepted another laced coffee, fished out a ball of clay from between the seat and the side of his armchair.

"Funny places your guests park their chewing gum," he observed

"I'd like to do your hands one day," said Clare

"What's wrong with my face?"

"Oh, that's quite interesting too. But you'd never sit still long enough for a portrait bust."

"I'll sit still for a month when I've got this case tied up "

"But I thought it was."

"Bless your heart, lady, it's only just begun. Chap answering to the description of Cyprian Gleed seen leaving the premises just after the time the murder could have been committed. All right, we pull him in for an identification parade tomorrow—set him in line with half a dozen other types wearing duffel coats and large black hats."

"And beards," said Nigel.

"All right. We can rustle up false beards for them. But do you think that nitwit Susan Jones will be able to pick out our man? It'd be a miracle And they don't happen—not to me."

"So you're sure he's your man?" asked Nigel. "What about that page inserted in the autobiography?"

"Lord love you, Mr Strangeways, that's the strongest bit of evidence against him, to my mind Not that the D.P.P would look at it You've been barking up the wrong tree The whole thing's quite simple. Young Gleed is desperate for money, and he hates his mother When I first interviewed him, he pretended not to know that she'd made no will. But he might well have known that she hadn't. All right. She's going to die intestate. Now he's been in and out of her room at Wenham & Geraldine's he's had plenty of opportunity to read her book There's a page in it which states or suggests that she'd had a child by another man before her marriage to Gleed's father This page may not have made it clear she never married the man That doesn't greatly matter, because in his last conversation with you young Gleed showed he knew nothing about the law of intestacy—didn't know that a bastard has no standing at all where there is a legitimate child. The

page he typed after cutting his mother's throat was inserted to *ensure that the authorities should never look further than himself for the next-of-kin.*"

"Yes," said Nigel slowly, "that seems plausible enough. But aren't you forgetting the other thing the murderer did to the typescript?"

"I'm forgetting nothing," Wright strenuously replied. "You're thinking of the erased capital G further back? Look—imagine you're Cyprian Gleed. You've killed your mother, you've taken out the give-away sheet and replaced it with the fake one you've just typed. You riffle back through a few pages of the typescript, and suddenly your own initial stares you in the face."

"But—"

"In that state of mind, he could easily mistake a G for a C. Cyprian. He's in a hell of a hurry to get away—no time to study the reference of that capital letter. It just rises up off the page and points at him, like his dead mother's finger. So he hurriedly rubs it out."

"You're an awfully imaginative man, Inspector," said Clare, shivering a little.

"Yes," said Nigel. "I hadn't thought of that possibility."

Inspector Wright now outlined his next moves. Cyprian Gleed was under close surveillance. Wright had interviewed him again this afternoon, but without bringing up Susan Jones' statement. Gleed had denied buying recently either a duffel coat or a grip bag. Armed with photographs of the young man, Wright's team would intensify their efforts to trace such purchases and that of a cut-throat razor. The appeal to the public had so far produced nothing useful, but, now that Susan Jones' statement had narrowed down the time limit, a further appeal would appear in tomorrow's newspapers, based on the probability that the murderer had thrown his bag off Hungerford Bridge at about 5:45, five minutes after leaving the publishers' office. It was already established that the duffel-coated figure had not been a bona-fide visitor.

"What puzzles me," put in Nigel at this point, "is that he should still have been wearing the coat when Susan saw him. It must have been blood-stained. Admittedly, the staff have all left by 5:40 P.M. on Fridays; but there was still a risk of bumping into one of the partners. Why didn't he take off the duffel coat and put it in the bag before leaving Miss Miles' room?"

"Probably just forgot to. Nerve snapped at last. Anything to get out of that room double-quick."

"Do you suggest he walked out into the street covered with blood?"

"He could have taken off the coat and stowed it away after he'd gone through the swing door and before opening the street door." Inspector

Wright's burning eyes were fixed upon Nigel's. "Never satisfied, are you, till you've crossed all the t's."

Nigel shrugged. "I expect you're right But I'm still bothered about that duffel coat. He did everything else so very much according to plan. And there was something Susan said to me—or rather, the way she put it. You gave a sort of unconscious echo of it, yourself, a few minutes ago." He broke off, looking abstracted.

"The maestro's got an attack of mystification," Clare remarked

"There are times when a uniform can be the best disguise. Remember Chesterton's story about the postman? But this would work the opposite way—a murderer *wanting* himself to be seen. Ah well." Nigel turned suddenly upon the Inspector. "Have you considered Arthur Geraldine in the role of a dark horse?"

"Now where are we off to?"

Nigel described his interview with the senior partner after lunch. Suppose that Millicent Miles' original story, as told to Mrs. Blayne, *had* been true. Suppose the young Geraldine did try to assault that extremely mature schoolgirl. The "blinding row" which took place, Geraldine had said, over the sale of the Rockingham set might have been in fact over his attempt upon Millicent Her father might have agreed to let the matter go no further, in return for cash Certainly, a year later, though he had not got another job, he had seemed to Stephen to be living quite comfortably Mr. Miles could have no hold over the young Geraldine without a written confession by the latter He would hush the matter up, in return for an annual payment, say, and the confession as security for it When Mr Miles died, a few years after his wife, this confession would pass into the hands of his daughter At that period she was affluent. But recently, with her books out of fashion, might she not have brought the document into circulation again?

"It's a preposterous idea," said Wright warmly. "A young chap might fall for that sort of intimidation; but Geraldine isn't a callow youth now; he'd go straight to the police, if Miss Miles threatened him, he'd know that the plaintiff's name isn't mentioned nowadays in blackmail trials of this kind"

"That's all very well in theory But in practice he couldn't be sure that his name wouldn't come out. And a respectable publisher's reputation couldn't survive that sort of scandal—not when it was backed by a written confession."

"All right," said the Inspector in a humoring way. "So he murdered her to stop her mouth. Where's the document, then—the confession? It's definitely not among her papers But if she brought it to the office last Friday,

to bargain with him, don't tell me he couldn't have taken it from her without having to slit her throat first. Or alternatively, he'd buy it from her, in which case the murder would be pointless."

Nigel made a defeated gesture. The sinus pain was bad this evening, blunting his intelligence. He took from his pocket a bottle of nose drops, filled the syringe and unscrewed it, placing the bottle on the floor beside him. Clare got up from the settee to make room for Nigel to lie full length on it and hang his head backward over the edge In doing so, her foot caught the bottle, knocking it over.

"Oh, damn it all, Nigel, why will you always leave things on the floor?"

"Sorry, darling."

"It's gone all over the rug." Clare looked about for an old cloth, then bent down to mop up the liquid. *"Nigel!"*

"What's the matter?" Holding the filled syringe, Nigel sat upright Clare, rigid, pointed at the stain on the rug, from which a thin, vicious thread of smoke was now rising. The next instant she stamped her foot on the stain, as if it were a viper—stamped again and again, till Inspector Wright pulled her away from it. The black rug, where the liquid had splashed out, was turning a dirty brown. Bright-eyed, the Inspector regarded it.

"Ha! Oil of vitriol."

"What?" Clare was glaring stupidly at the bottle. She stooped as if to pick it up.

"No! Don't touch it!" said Wright sharply. "Mr. Strangeways, give me that syringe."

Clare whirled round, her face dead white.

"Oh, Nigel! Did you—?"

"It's all right, love." Nigel held up the syringe, still full, for her to see, then handed it to Wright.

"I'm always knocking things over," moaned Clare, quite dazed.

"Lucky for Mr. Strangeways you are."

Clare's rigid face softened. Crumpling, she fell forward into Nigel's arms, gazed up at him incredulously, and stroked her fingers along his cheek as if to reassure herself that he was still there.

"What would have happened?" Her voice was shaking, almost inaudible.

"Well, a syringeful of vitriol, injected into the sinus—"

Clare laid her trembling hand on Nigel's mouth, and burst into tears.

When she was calmer, Inspector Wright asked the inevitable question.

"I don't know," said Nigel. "Protheroe and Geraldine both had the bottle in their possession today: I left it behind in—no, what a fool I am!

This thing has addled my wits. I finished that bottle, and took a fresh one out of my medicine cupboard before coming along this evening."

Clare shuddered convulsively in his arms

"And who had access to your medicine cupboard?" asked Wright.

"Well, it's in the loo." Nigel frowned. "The other evening, when Cyprian Gleed came to see me, he asked if he might use it. My goodness, and he—"

Nigel stopped abruptly. He did not want to harrow Clare's feelings any more, so he refrained from repeating Gleed's last words to him on that occasion—

"I'll let myself out, when I've finished. *You probably won't be seeing me again.*"

XV *CLOSE UP*

"But why should he do it? Such a foul, vicious thing? It's what you'd expect of a—a corrupt child."

"He is a corrupt child It was an act of pure spite I'd wounded his vanity pretty deeply once or twice before that evening he came to my house. And I waded into him unmercifully then I must say, I hardly blame him—"

"Oh nonsense, my darling. Don't be so bloody Christian and understanding. I'd like to toast him over a slow fire."

Clare and Nigel were breakfasting the next morning There were shadows under Clare's eyes, and her long black hair had an enchanting glossiness. She smiled dreamily at Nigel, then seemed to withdraw into herself, with that quality of elusiveness which had captivated him the first time they met.

"I hope you're going to keep up this habit of saving my life That's twice so far."

Leaning over, Clare laid her mouth on his and held it there for a long time.

"Do you know what you are? A cross between a black cat and a white camellia," said Nigel.

"You make me tremble every time you come near me. Still."

"That's a good thing isn't it?"

"A very good thing." Clare rose, and sat down on the other side of the table "I feel like a convalescent. All weak and wondering. Look, the sun's come out."

"Busy old fool."

"What'll happen to him?"

"Oh, Wright'll trace where he got the stuff and pull him in for attempting grievous bodily harm or whatever they call it."

Clare Massinger took a lump of clay and began kneading it with her small, strong fingers.

"Irresponsibility," Nigel continued. "That's Gleed's trouble. The inability or the refusal to envisage the full consequences of an act His mother was the same, but she had talent of a sort, to keep her on a more or less level keel."

"I knew a child once who strung a piece of wire across a drive to decapitate her governess bicycling back in the dark."

"I hope you were soundly thrashed for it."

Clare colored deliciously. "I never said— Oh, well, yes, I was. Luckily the wire had sagged, through my own incompetence, by the time she got back, so it only caught her front wheel But my parents took the will for the deed, as they say."

"Whither is this gruesome reminiscence tending?"

"The point is, I'd not have stuck a knife into that governess, or pushed her off a cliff. Yet I was prepared to attempt long-range decapitation. Children have no imagination—I mean, I visualized with great relish the wire whipping off her head; but in a way I didn't believe it could happen—it was like an experiment that someone else would be bound to stop before it got too dangerous. Children's imagination is so limited."

Nigel watched her attentively. The lump of clay, which she absently molded, was taking the form of a rudimentary horse. "A deficient sense of reality. Yes?"

"It does seem odd to me," said Clare in her light, high voice, "that a chap who could fix up that long-range, delayed-action thing for you could also walk up to his mother and cut her throat. I'd have expected him to use poison on her, if anything. But perhaps we've analyzed him all wrong."

"Perhaps," said Nigel, giving her a noncommittal look.

When he got back to his own house, half an hour later, Nigel found a telephone message from Liz Wenham, asking him to go and see her as soon as possible: she would be at home all the morning.

The room in which Miss Wenham received him was lined with books and filled with knickknacks She herself, dumpy in a tweed suit of a rather unbecoming pattern, clear-eyed, decisive in manner, resembled more than ever a Victorian blue-stocking or a member of some North Country family with a tradition of sweetness and light—more light than sweetness, perhaps —behind it: one of the great intellectual dynasties which have intermarried and preserved in the raffish modern world an earnestness, a faint academic aroma, a confident moral tone and a general air of unremitting mental hygiene, inherited from their vigorous forebears.

She herself was sitting behind a ponderous reading stand which, Nigel was at once convinced, had belonged to the famous James Wenham. Indeed, if Cyprian Gleed's room was a mausoleum of false starts, this one was a museum of successful finishes: the furniture, the photographs, the ornaments, above all the books (autographed, no doubt, by their celebrated

authors, with obliging tributes to the Wenham dynasty), conveyed the impression of a solidity too grand to be labeled as smugness.

"Well, Mr. Strangeways, when is this mess going to be cleared up?" was Liz Wenham's crisp opening.

"In a few days, I think."

"The police are satisfied they know the identity of the murderer?"

"Ye-es, I believe they are."

"But you are not satisfied?"

"It's not my department. I'm only concerned with the libel trouble"

Liz Wenham's gray eyes sparkled frostily. "Come, come, Mr Strangeways, don't let us be evasive with each other."

"Well then. Cyprian Gleed had motive and opportunity Moreover, he—or someone closely resembling him—was seen leaving the office at 5:40 on the night of the murder."

"This is news to me," said Liz quickly. A certain fullness in her voice suggested to Nigel that it was good news He gave her an edited account of Susan's statement.

"I shall have to speak to that girl. What was she doing in the packers' room? Cuddling, I suppose" Cuddling might have been equivalent to Babylonian orgies, the way Miss Wenham made it sound.

"It's called 'necking' nowadays," Nigel could not refrain from saying

"Really? What an *inadequate* word! But I didn't ask you here to discuss erotic synonyms" Liz Wenham was looking at him very straightly. "You'll have realized by now that the firm of Wenham & Geraldine means everything to me I would stop at nothing to preserve its good name." Liz Wenham emphasized her remarks by beating her fist on her knee; and there was indeed an almost fanatical look in the gray eyes.

"Ah," said Nigel, smiling pleasantly at her, "you're going to ask me to suppress evidence."

Liz flushed deeply, but answered without resentment. "Not about the—the death of Miss Miles." She clenched her fist again. "Arthur Geraldine made an extraordinary confession to me last night. I have his permission to pass on the gist of it to you. He did not feel disposed"—Liz looked momentarily uncomfortable—"to face you directly with it I understand you had already broached the matter to him."

"About his attempted rape of Millicent Miles when she was a schoolgirl?"

Liz Wenham flinched at this plain speaking, but continued "Your facts were mainly correct, but your interpretation is wrong Arthur assures me that it was a put-up job between the girl and her father, though he did not

perceive this at the time. The girl—er—maneuvered him into a compromising situation, whereupon the father entered the room and surprised them."

"Well, that's certainly a new angle on the story."

"Don't you believe it? It has happened often enough, though not perhaps with a schoolgirl as the agent provocateur Arthur was young and inexperienced. He's not got a very great deal of backbone, you know. Anyway, he was made to sign a confession, and he paid the father regular hush money for several years till Mr. Miles died."

"And then the daughter took over?"

"No. There's no question of that" According to his own account of it, Liz Wenham continued, Arthur Geraldine had not been blackmailed by Miss Miles. He had given her favored treatment, when the firm took her over, partly because she might prove a remunerative author herself and also help the firm through her contacts in the literary world, and partly, as he had admitted to Liz, from anxiety lest she should begin raking up the past. But in fact she had never referred to it, or to the written "confession" her father had extracted from him, and he assumed now that it had been destroyed after Mr. Miles' death.

"So there you are," Liz concluded, with a challenging glance at Nigel. "It's a deplorable story, but nothing worse. And I rely on you to keep it to yourself."

"Inspector Wright and I would certainly not publicize it. But we could not prevent it coming out in court, if Mr. Geraldine was charged—"

"But you *must* see," Liz impatiently exclaimed, "he had no possible motive."

"If the account he gave you is correct. We've only his word for it. Or rather, yours."

"Are you suggesting that *I* made it up?"

"You said just now you'd stop at nothing to preserve the good name of your firm. Wait a minute! The account you've given sounds convincing enough to me. But it cannot clear your partner of all suspicion."

"But Cyprian Gleed was seen—"

"Someone wearing a duffel coat, a dark hat and a beard was seen. A smallish person Neither Mr. Geraldine, nor Ryle, nor Protheroe is tall Nor, for that matter, are you. The footprints in Miss Miles' blood show that the murderer was wearing size 10 galoshes None of you has large feet you could all get that size of galoshes over your shoes"

Nigel was watching Liz Wenham closely while he spoke At one point, he noticed, her whole expression changed, making her look vulnerable, almost helpless.

"But Stephen left the office well before 5:40. I thought that was established," she said. It sounded less like a statement than an appeal

"Oh yes, he did," Nigel drew out a long silence. "What a charming flat he has. I don't wonder he seldom leaves it."

Liz seemed quite at a loss with this change of subject.

"Do you know the people he was staying with last weekend?" asked Nigel.

"Yes. The husband is one of our authors."

"A close friend of Mr. Protheroe's?"

"I couldn't say how close. But I believe Stephen had a standing invitation to go down there."

"Of which he didn't avail himself till last weekend?"

"Mr. Strangeways! I dislike insinuation, and I dislike tittle-tattle." Liz Wenham was suddenly very angry indeed. Her dumpy body went quite rigid. "It would be more straightforward to ask Mr. Protheroe these questions."

No, thought Nigel, the firm of Wenham & Geraldine doesn't mean *everything* to you. He said, "I'm sorry I have a devious mind. And in a murder investigation the straight-forward route is not always the most profitable one."

"But you are only concerned with the libel trouble. You said so yourself."

"Now it's you who are being evasive, I think. Besides, the libel may be linked with the murder." Nigel paused again. "Has Stephen Protheroe ever talked to you about his brother, Peter?"

"The missionary? No. He died years ago, didn't he? Stephen has always been reticent about his private life."

"So you've no idea what produced *Fire and Ash?*"

"A poet produced it," replied Miss Wenham, in her forthright manner.

"But not out of thin air. No one, the age he was then, could just *imagine* so much naked experience."

"He has a great capacity for suffering, no doubt."

"But not for writing out of it, any longer. Tell me," Nigel went on, "how is Basil Ryle nowadays?"

"He seems to be coping a bit better," Liz coolly replied. "You had a talk with him, didn't you?"

"Yes. He was in rather a taking—had the idea he might have killed Miss Miles in a brainstorm."

"I'm afraid he's not a very well-balanced character. The war, you know" Liz Wenham's eye wandered, and she spoke in a distrait manner. "Not that he isn't brilliant at his work It was something of a gamble when we took

him into partnership, but it has certainly been justified. A great pity he got himself mixed up with that woman. A brainstorm, did you say?"

"Yes. So he feared."

Liz Wenham gave signs of wishing the interview to be prolonged no further—such clear signs of impatience that Nigel, having offered to let himself out, paused for a moment outside the drawing-room door, and heard Miss Wenham dial a number and presently say, "Stephen? It's Liz. Could you lunch with me? At home?" Her voice, caught up in some extreme urgency of emotion, was barely recognizable. She is a very intelligent woman, thought Nigel as he walked away down the street, and yet somehow a very guileless one.

Late that same afternoon, Inspector Wright rang Nigel at home. The result of the identification parade had been negative, he said: Susan thought she recognized Cyprian Gleed as the person she had seen leaving the office, but was not prepared to swear to it in court. On the other hand, the source of the vitriol had been traced—a friend of Cyprian Gleed's who worked in a manufacturing chemist's, had supplied him with it. Faced with this evidence, Cyprian had "shammed dead," as Wright put it—refused to make any statement without legal advice, and been duly charged and arrested. The appeal to the public had so far produced no eye-witness of the hypothetical doings on Hungerford Bridge, thus confirming Inspector Wright in his view that Londoners were an unobservant race The police had failed to trace the recent purchase of a grip bag, a duffel coat or a razor by Cyprian Gleed.

"You're wasting your time on that, surely. He'd never walk into Wenham & Geraldine's in his usual attire, if he was going to commit murder. There'd be some attempt at disguise," said Nigel.

"We're inquiring about the purchase of a light macintosh, too, of course."

"A light macintosh?" Nigel was taken aback.

"Yes. One that'd roll up fairly small and could be stowed easily in the grip bag. A large-size macintosh."

"Oh, I see. You mean, he'd wear it *over* his duffel coat, to keep the blood off it, and pack it away as soon as he'd done the job?"

"Yes. He has an old mac, but there are no traces of blood on it. Therefore we look for a new one."

"You think of everything."

"I'm paid to, Mr. Strangeways."

"But have you thought about the hat? A large, black hat? Very few people wear them in this country. What a give-away!"

"Maybe he couldn't afford a new hat, as well as a mac. He was broke—"

"Oh bosh! Anyone can steal a hat."

"But he knew the office would be almost empty after 5.30. He could be pretty certain there'd be nobody on the top floor or the ground floor, at any rate, and the lift took him past the floor where the partners work."

"And the key of the side door?"

"Ah, if we could trace that to him, it'd be a push-over. I've had yet another go at Miriam Sanders—she's disillusioned at last about young Gleed, by the way, after being told what he tried to do to you—but she swears she never lent him the key, and I believe her He knew where it was kept, though, and he was in the office the day it disappeared. I've no doubt he distracted her attention for a moment and pinched it"

Sunday passed without event. At half past ten on Monday morning, while Nigel Strangeways was digesting his breakfast and a report from the Greengarth police, which Wright had sent him by special messenger, the telephone bell rang. It was Arthur Geraldine In a subdued tone, as though he were condoling with Nigel over a bereavement, he announced that a most unfortunate occurrence had just taken place in the office. Could Nigel spare the time to come along immediately?

"What is it? What's happened?" asked Nigel, half expecting to be told of another death on the premises.

"The—er—weapon has come to light. A razor It puts me in a very awkward position That's why I rang you first."

Awkward position, indeed! thought Nigel, fuming with irritation as the taxi bore him eastward. I bet I know where the razor was found.

He would have won the bet. Five minutes before Geraldine had telephoned, his secretary entered Basil Ryle's room.

"Mr. Geraldine would like to look through the *Aston Memoirs* file before the publicity meeting, Mr. Ryle," she said.

"Never heard of it," replied Ryle grumpily.

"It's on the top shelf. If I could stand on your chair—"

Ryle relinquished the chair The girl got onto it, and reached up toward the row of dusty filing boxes ranged along the top of the bookshelf behind the desk. Taking one out, she opened it, withdrew a cardboard folder, from which, as she replaced the box with her other hand, an object slid out and fell onto the desk with a clatter, as though a thread that had held it invisibly suspended for days above Basil Ryle's head was at last frayed through.

On the desk lay a heavy cut-throat razor. It had sprung open, and where blade met handle there was a little red-brown spot. Basil Ryle stared at it.

The secretary stared at him. A spasm, like a paralytic stroke, made one side of his face jerk convulsively.

"Oh, Mr. Ryle, whatever—?"

"Get on with it. Take the file to Mr. Geraldine What are you waiting for?" Ryle's voice was calm, lifeless. "And this," he added, pointing to the razor, as the girl clambered down from the chair. "*No!* Not in your hand Are you too highbrow to read detective novels? Here, wrap it in my handkerchief. Tell Mr. Geraldine where you found it, and not to mess it up with his fingerprints. Yes, blood does look like rust, doesn't it? Never mind."

Ryle's unnatural composure broke, and he went into a storm of laughter which drove the terrified girl out of the room. . . .

So much Nigel was told when he arrived. Arthur Geraldine's secretary, having given her account of it, was dismissed. The senior partner and Liz Wenham glanced covertly at Nigel, there was a look in his pale blue eyes which made them uncomfortable; they would have been far more uncomfortable if they had known what a cold, furious anger was mounting behind those eyes.

"Who asked for this file?" he curtly demanded.

"We're to discuss the publicity for a forthcoming volume of memoirs this morning," said Geraldine, "and we wanted to refresh our memory about the promotion campaign we did some years ago for a somewhat similar title."

"Yes, yes. But whose idea was it to look up the *Aston Memoirs* file?"

"Well, actually I think Miss Wenham suggested—"

"Have you rung the police?"

"No. I thought it best—"

"Then do so now, at once."

While Geraldine telephoned, Nigel opened the razor within the handkerchief, and exposed it to view on the senior partner's desk.

"An old-fashioned article, isn't it, Miss Wenham? And all complete—even to a bloodstain. Most instructive So now Wenham & Geraldine can live happily ever afterward."

Liz Wenham's clear gray eyes wavered like pebbles in a stream. Her face had the clenched, stubborn expression of a child caught out in some misdemeanor.

"The Inspector is on his way," announced Geraldine.

"Let the dead bury their dead. Who's with Ryle? Protheroe?"

"Really, Mr. Strangeways!" Liz protested. "Did you expect us to put him under house arrest?"

Nigel's anger blazed out at last "Good God in heaven! Who's talking

about arrest? D'you mean to tell me you two have just left him to brood over this alone? When you know the state of mind he's been in? Are you incapable of thinking about anything but your net profits?"

Snatching up the razor in the handkerchief, Nigel ran along the passage to Basil Ryle's room.

The young man was sitting at his desk, so white and still that he might well have been a corpse. As Nigel entered, he raised his hands, which lay before him crossed at the wrists, as though handcuffed, then let them fall again on the desk.

"I thought you were the police They're a long time coming"

"Snap out of it, Ryle."

"I must have done it. Don't you see?—this proves it." Ryle's chin was on his breast again; his voice was flattened out with utter dejection Nigel took him by the shoulders, and shaking him hard, forced him to look up.

"It proves damn all. Here, look at the bloody great thing! No, *look* at it!" Nigel opened the handkerchief, laying the razor on the desk. "Do you realize what a police search is? They searched the whole building a week ago. Do you really imagine they'd miss a thing like this?"

"You mean—?"

"I mean this razor was put into the filing box after the police search. It was put there yesterday or on Saturday afternoon."

"By the murderer?" asked Ryle, staring, visibly coming to life again

"It is *not* the weapon the murderer used."

"But the blood—?"

"Anyone can draw blood. It's a commodity we all possess."

"Well, it beats me then. Whose razor is it, for God's sake?"

"I don't know for certain But I think we shall find out that it belongs to a dead man."

XVI *FINAL PROOF*

"Oh yes," said Nigel, "Cyprian Gleed has been arrested all right. This is by way of being a little private experiment of my own. What they call a 'reconstruction of the crime.' Just to work out the timing."

Nigel glanced once again at his wrist watch. Stephen Protheroe and Basil Ryle exchanged the simpering, embarrased looks of members of an audience who have been called onto the platform to assist a conjuror. The three men were in Protheroe's room at Wenham & Geraldine's; it was late on Monday afternoon.

"The staff leaves the office in two waves," said Nigel, "the first at 5 P.M., the second at 5:30. There's ten minutes to go before the second exodus. Let's start."

He put on his macintosh, picked up a stout grip bag which lay on the floor, and led the other two out of the room. They took the lift to the ground floor.

"The side door is bolted till 5:30. Right?"

"Right," said Stephen.

Nigel went through the swing door and unbolted the side door beyond it, which gave onto the street. Then, followed by his two companions, he turned back and walked through the reception room and out by the main door, watched curiously by Miriam Sanders.

"I am the murderer," he said "Observe closely everything I do, and don't ask unnecessary questions."

Taking out a key, he unlocked the side door In the space between it and the swing door, he whisked from his bag a duffel coat and a large black hat, put them on, peered through the swing door, then dashed for the lift, which was only a few paces away.

"You'll have to imagine the beard," he said

"But how did he know the lift would be at the ground floor?" Ryle asked

"Took a chance on it. Or maybe propped the door open."

"But—"

"Here we are. Follow me, don't get in the way, and remember that Miss Miles was expecting a visitor."

Nigel hurried down the passage, past the door of Stephen's room to the next one. They had met nobody so far. As he entered Millicent Miles'

room, one of his companions gave a sharp exhalation, like the sound of a cat spitting; for the light was on in the room, and a woman sat at the table, typing, her back to the door.

"For God's sake—" exclaimed Basil Ryle.

"Shut up! I turn the key, behind my back. I put down the bag. Miss Miles doesn't look round, she's expecting me. I take one long stride."

Whipping a handkerchief from his pocket, Nigel stuffed it into the mouth of the woman at the typewriter, stifling her cry of surprise, and in the same movement tilted her backward, chair and all, so that her head was flung back and her throat exposed. Her feet began kicking at the desk; he dragged the chair away from it, took out an imaginary weapon, and passed it across her throat.

"I should be wearing gloves, of course," he said. "You'll observe that, holding her in this position from behind, I have her quite helpless. Also, I avoid the blood spurting out, except for my left arm which is clamped round her arms and body."

Stephen Protheroe shuddered violently. Nigel's level, expository tones were like those of a surgeon giving his internes a running commentary upon an operation. His back pressed to the wall, as if he were trying to force himself through it, Basil Ryle glared at the scene.

"Only ten seconds or so since I entered. The victim is dying. The police reconstruction showed that it was done just like this You must imagine the blood on my forearm and on the floor as I move to the next stage."

Standing a little away from the chair, Nigel let it down, with its burden, till its back was on the floor. He took the woman under the armpits, drew her away from the chair and dragged her to a corner of the room, where she lay with her black hair streaming over the dusty floor

"I should be wearing galoshes," said Nigel. "The murderer put them on, over his shoes, at some stage before entering the room—in the lift, possibly."

Taking a staple from his pocket, and an ebony ruler from the desk, Nigel secured the sliding window.

"The door is locked. The window is fastened shut. Now I remove my bloodstained gloves and put on a fresh pair." Nigel went through the motions; then, setting the chair upright again, sat down at the typewriter.

"There's blood on the chair, but the duffel coat is expendable—and anyway, I'm in a hurry."

Leaning over him, Stephen murmured, "Is all this gruesome detail necessary? I don't think Basil can stand it much longer."

Without replying, Nigel flicked the sheet of paper out of the machine, inserted another, and began typing.

"I'm copying from the actual sheet the murderer typed to insert in his victim's autobiography. This is where my timing may go a little wrong I don't know how fast he typed, but presumably he knew by heart what had to be written. We shall get a time check in a few minutes, when the 5:30 exodus begins. Susan heard a typewriter in here as she passed by the door."

Nigel's dispassionate, almost pedantic tones heightened the unreality of the scene—an unreality whose focal point was the body of the woman sprawled upon her back in the corner, to which Stephen's eyes and Basil's kept reluctantly returning, Basil's in horror and Stephen's with a kind of puzzlement.

There was a confused noise of doors opening and footsteps passing. It was 5:30 P.M.

"An unnerving moment for the murderer," Nigel commented "But that night nearly everyone on this floor had left the office earlier. . . . Right. I've finished typing this sheet. I substitute it for the relevant page in the autobiography—I daresay we shall never know what that page contained, but we can be sure it gave a clue to the murderer's identity. O K. But I'm still not quite happy. Some instinct tells me that my victim may unconsciously have put in another bit of evidence against me, since I last read the typescript. I leaf back through the sheets—I need only worry about the chapter describing a certain period of her younger days. I see, in the margin, a penciled capital letter It might be a G. or a C It gives me quite a turn. I rub it out."

" 'G'? Gleed?" asked Ryle in a dry, harsh whisper. "But she wouldn't—"

"It couldn't be Gleed, or Cyprian, he wasn't born till ten years later," said Nigel.

"Try 'G' for Geraldine," Stephen suggested.

Basil Ryle stared uncomprehendingly at him.

"I'm satisfied there are no more marginal references to me," Nigel resumed. "Now comes rather a nasty bit. And this is where the murderer made two mistakes."

Lifting the typewriter, he laid it on the floor beside the woman's body. He took up her flaccid fingers, wiped each of them, then, after polishing the keys of the machine, pressed her fingers upon them.

"You see what's wrong?" He looked up sharply at Ryle.

"Well—no."

"She was a touch typist I'm putting her fingerprints on the wrong keys. And now I make my second mistake I replace the typewriter on the table,

so. I insert the sheet my victim was typing when I surprised her. But I don't get it back in alignment. That's why the police first suspected the murderer had done some typing. A fatal oversight on his part."

Nigel proceeded to remove the staple which held the sliding window fast. After a slow look round the room, he said,

"Well, that's all for here. What's the time? Five forty-two We're running a little late—the murderer was seen leaving the building at 5:40. Come along."

"But—"

"Oh, yes, galoshes. He probably removed them at the door and put them in the bag."

"But for Christ's sake!" exclaimed Basil Ryle, pointing at the woman lying in the corner, eyes closed, breathing equably, a tumble of black hair about her pale face. *"Who is that?"*

"Oh, she's my dummy."

"Won't you introduce us?" said Stephen.

"No time. Come along." At the door, Nigel said, "Thank you very much, Clare. That will be all. See you later."

They went down in the lift. As they passed through the swing door, Nigel said, "The murderer was seen at this point, wearing black hat and duffel coat. No doubt he removed them and put them in his bag after the swing door closed behind him."

In the confined space, Nigel jostled the other two as he took his macintosh from the bag and exchanged it for the duffel coat. Stephen Protheroe looked worried but interested; Basil Ryle seemd to be in a daze. They went out into Angel Street, joining the stream of city workers which flowed toward Embankment Gardens like a tributary winding to the Thames. They passed through Charing Cross Underground Station and climbed the steps up to the northern end of Hungerford Bridge. Nigel's companions had some difficulty in keeping up with his long stride; he moved in an abstraction which they found formidable. Basil Ryle, however, broke the silence·

"Do you mean to say that Cyprian Gleed just walked into the office, in his usual clothes, and—and did all that?"

" 'Usual clothes'? Would you expect the murderer to wear fancy dress?" Nigel harshly answered.

"I'd never have thought he'd have the nerve."

Nigel stopped abruptly—they were now halfway across the bridge—and gazed meditatively at his companions.

"Perfect hatred casteth out fear," he said.

Stephen Protheroe's fine eyes held Nigel's for a moment, as the three moved closer to the rail of the bridge to let the hurrying commuters pass.

"Why did you ask us to watch this reconstruction?" Stephen's fishlike mouth nibbled for words. "I mean, you could have worked out the timing by yourself."

"I thought you'd be interested," was Nigel's stony reply. He turned toward the river, with the arc lamps of the bridge behind him. Lights from the Embankment scribbled hieroglyphs on the restless water below. The Shell-Mex Building and the Festival Hall blazed at each other across the Thames. A train rumbled onto the bridge, with a long-drawn clattering reverberation. As it passed, Nigel released the grip bag which he had been holding over the rail, out of sight.

"You see? Nobody noticed anything."

"Noticed what?" Basil asked, almost shouting.

"You didn't even notice yourself. A murderer dropping into the Thames a weighted bag containing a duffel coat, a large black hat, some gloves, a pair of galoshes, a razor, and one thing more" Nigel gradually lowered his voice, as the thunder of the electric train receded.

"One thing more?" Ryle shook his head as if to clear it of bewilderment.

Nigel turned to Stephen. "Can't *you* tell him?"

There was a little silence, then Stephen said with a frown, "But you told us that Cyprian Gleed had been arrested."

"I never said he'd been arrested for murder."

"What *is* all this?" Ryle edgily asked. "I can't make head or tail of—"

"In that case"—Stephen Protheroe's resonant voice was clearly audible through the shuffle and clatter of the passers-by—"the 'one thing more' could have been a false beard."

"Correct."

"Then the murderer disguised himself to look like Cyprian Gleed?" Basil's face changed from consternation to a kind of timid hopefulness

"Come on. We're wasting time." Nigel led them past the Festival Hall Four minutes later they were passing through the main booking office of Waterloo Station. The clock hands stood at 5.57, as the three men emerged into the great space filled with a rush-hour crowd hurrying toward the departure platforms.

"You see," said Nigel, "in spite of my lecture en route, there's still time."

"Time for what?" Stephen Protheroe's face was working like a disturbed anthill.

Nigel looked full into his eyes, saying sadly, almost remorsefully, "Time

for you to pick up your bag—*your weekend bag*—at the Left Luggage Office and catch the 6:05."

Involuntarily, Stephen's eyes switched toward the Left Luggage Office. Inspector Wright and Detective Sergeant Fenton were standing at the withdrawal counter Stephen gave a little nightmare whimper, then darted away, running diagonally left toward the open gate of a departure platform which was sucking in its last few belated travelers like a drain.

Nigel started after him. Wright and the Sergeant moved to cut him off. But to get through the solid stream of travelers hurrying from right to left across Nigel's path was like swimming at right angles to an irresistible current. Bumping and tripping, he was carried off course and lost sight of the quarry he could not, in any case, quite wholeheartedly pursue. When he set eyes on Stephen again, the little man was not where he had expected him to be. Under cover of the crowds, he had doubled sharply right like a coursed hare, and was now at the barrier of an arrival platform some thirty yards away.

Nigel waved frantically to Inspector Wright, who came breasting up the stream of passengers toward him. He turned again, making for the barrier, to see—with a stab of anguished compunction—that Stephen Protheroe was getting a platform ticket from the slot machine there. At the same moment he became aware of a sound like the first drum roll of distant thunder, a vibration in the air which was felt rather than heard above all the confused din of the station.

"No! Don't do it! Don't!" Nigel silently cried. The ticket collector, still oblivious to Wright's shouts and waving, punched Stephen Protheroe's ticket. The thunderous vibration swelled. Side by side now, Wright and Nigel tore through the gate. Twenty yards ahead of them, running away up the platform, Stephen looked round once, dodged a porter who tried to intercept him, and raced on to meet the great locomotive which drew its train, gradual as lava, toward the buffers—raced to meet it, as if it were his salvation, not his doom, and threw himself under the iron wheels.

"When did you first suspect it was Stephen?" Basil Ryle asked

" 'When did you first begin to love me?' Who can answer that?" There were exhaustion and bitterness in Nigel's voice Clare put her hand over his. The three were in Clare's studio, late that same night. Nigel turned to Ryle. "Sorry, I'm feeling foul. I liked him."

"Let's skip it, then " The color was back in Ryle's cheeks; he had been looking round the studio, relishing like a convalescent after a dangerous

illness the mere existence of everyday objects. Nigel began to answer his original question.

"It was an entry in Miss Miles' diary for the day she was murdered. 'Thorsday?!' What could that mean except a showdown about General Thoresby's book? Cyprian Gleed told me he'd seen his mother, alone in Stephen's room, bending over the proof copy, the morning it went back to the printers. If it was she who had tampered with it, and Stephen who had presented an ultimatum, she'd never have written that word in her diary, and with an exclamation mark Therefore, the position was vice versa. Even the pun told its story. She hated puns. Stephen made them, just to annoy her. So, in her childishly vindictive way, she made a pun of the time when her ultimatum was due to expire."

"But the motive seems so feeble," said Ryle. "Do you mean to say he killed her just because she threatened to expose him to the partners for mucking about with that proof?"

Clare said, "It'd only have been her word against his, anyway. Why should the partners have believed her?"

"His job, his security were at stake. So he thought. It was her threat that lit the train. But the train itself—a long history of brooding hatred—it hardly bears thinking about." Nigel broke off for a little "What you don't realize is that Stephen had been living for months with nothing but a thin wall and a sliding window between himself and the woman who had drained the meaning out of his life Their child—"

"*What's* this? Whose child?" Ryle exclaimed.

Nigel told him the story of Paul Protheroe "Stephen inserted that fake page in the autobiography because the original page would have shown us a connection between him and Millicent, shown they had had a child, and given us his reason for tampering with the proof—as soon as we'd discovered that a Paul Protheroe was killed at Ulombo."

"I thought you believed his story that his brother had been the child's father," said Clare.

"I did at first." Nigel explained to Ryle where Peter Protheroe came in "You see, Stephen had two lines of defense The first was to prevent us finding out about his son at all When I broke through this, he fell back upon the second. It was at lunch in his flat. He then said that Millicent had had the child by his brother, Peter, a student for Holy Orders, and that he himself had taken the responsibility for it to prevent Peter's career being ruined at the start. It was ingeniously done. The new story couldn't be disproved, since Peter had died a year or two later in the mission field."

"What made you doubt it?"

"Stephen's poem. And his failure to write any more."

"I don't get it," said Ryle.

Rising to his feet, Nigel prowled restlessly about the studio. "*Fire and Ash* is the key to the whole wretched business," he said at last. "Stephen told me the Peter tale with extraordinary conviction. He made me *feel* the horror of the ordeal, from seduction to heartless repudiation, through which Millicent had dragged an idealistic young man. *Fire and Ash* was written, he said, out of his brother's experience, which he himself had observed. All right. But then I discovered he had tried later, again and again, to write poems, and they were all failures. If *Fire and Ash* had been the product of mere secondhand experience, why on earth should Stephen's faculty of imagination and poetic sympathy have utterly failed him over the subjects he attempted afterward? The fact he did so fail made me more and more certain that *Fire and Ash* must have come from firsthand experience—from a personal agony which had blasted his talent as well as disrupting his life. Poets are very tough inside, you know They don't give up the ghost because of anyone else's sufferings. But occasionally a poet's talent is killed by some traumatic experience of his own. I believe that, after what he went through with Millicent as a young man, he determined never to be vulnerable again; he retired into himself, scorching the earth behind him—and the poetic seed got burnt up in the process."

"Yet he found himself vulnerable to Millicent still, after all those years?" asked Clare, musing.

"Yes. His son, Paul, was the one thing he had saved from the wreck. Poetry failing him, he had transferred all his hopes and aspirations to the boy—centered all his affection upon him. Then Paul was killed. Stephen had nothing left. You can see how irresistible was the temptation to expose the Governor whose bungling had caused the boy's death."

"But Millicent—?" Ryle began.

Nigel turned full toward him. "Doesn't it occur to you that one of Stephen's motives for killing her was to prevent her destroying you? Prevent her making the havoc of your life she had made, thirty years ago, of his own?"

"Oh lord, oh lord," muttered Ryle, unable to meet Nigel's eyes.

"*One* motive—a minor one, though. Then there was his literary integrity: he would not be blackmailed into withdrawing his opposition to the firm's publishing her trashy novels."

Basil Ryle flushed to the roots of his red hair.

"But that was a subsidiary motive, too," Nigel continued. "There he was, living for months cheek by jowl with a woman who had struck one great

poem out of him and finished him in the process Oh, the wound began to bleed again, all right. I've no doubt she opened it wider and wider. I heard her say to him once, 'I do *write*, anyway ' She had plenty of opportunity to taunt him privately, through that sliding window. Jean heard her say to him, 'You're just impotent.' I'm sorry, Basil, but she was a bird of prey. She'd peck at him till he was a tangle of raw nerves, just as she did thirty years before, and a good deal more skillfully."

"Yes. She was skillful enough at that." Basil Ryle's voice was almost inaudible.

"She'd used her pregnancy once as a weapon against him, and I dare say he'd been near killing her then. Now she had another weapon, another way of exercising power over him—two stet marks on a proof copy. And this time he did kill her. She'd asked for it several times too often."

"I see all that," said Ryle presently "But I'm surprised he tried to involve Cyprian Gleed. It doesn't seem in character."

"It may have been an improvisation on his original plan. Not that he would have felt much compunction about it, when he compared that worthless young man with Millicent's other son—his own. Anyway, he'd planned to kill her on a Friday, when the staff would all have left the office soon after 5:30. He'd fixed up to stay the weekend with friends in Hampshire; he had a standing invitation to visit them; yet, as he himself told me, he seldom went out of London; and he'd never stayed with them before That alone should have roused our suspicion—in a murder investigation one always looks for the unhabitual, the non-routine action He'd worked out a fairly neat alibi—impressive without being blatantly watertight. Then, the day before, he overheard Millicent talking to her son on the telephone: she was going along to Cyprian's flat, after she'd had her showdown with Stephen the next evening: Cyprian would be awaiting her there, *alone*. Cyprian would have no alibi for the time of the murder. This may have given him the idea of dressing up as Cyprian, or it may have been part of his plan all along—we'll never know. Stephen had already pinched the spare key of the side door—in order to confuse the issue generally, I should think: but its disappearance would point the finger at Cyprian in particular. Stephen bought a duffel coat and a large black hat. Unfortunately he couldn't grow a beard overnight, so he had to buy a false one."

"Unfortunately?"

"Susan, when she described the man she'd seen leaving the office, used an odd form of words 'He'd got sort of hair at the side of his face,' she said —she only saw his back view, remember. I was alerted by that How peculiar that she shouldn't just say, 'He had a beard.' Unconsciously she had

registered it as a pseudo-beard. So the idea came to me of the murderer disguising himself as Cyprian Gleed just in case by ill luck he met anyone on his way to or from Miss Miles' room. Why should he not have taken off the bloodstained duffel coat *before* leaving her room? Because, if he were to be seen, he had to be seen wearing it. The one suspect who *couldn't afford* to be recognized in the office at that time was Stephen, who had been seen by Miriam Sanders leaving the building at 5:20 with a "weekend bag." He had to do the murder when he did because (a) Millicent would not wait for him much longer to keep his appointment with her, and (b) because his alibi partly depended upon Miss Sanders' seeing him go out of the building; and she herself would be leaving it at 5:30. Mind you, he never expected the time of the murder to be fixed so accurately by the police."

"How did they fix it?"

"By spotting that the sliding window had been nailed fast. He didn't anticipate their noticing it. When the police first questioned him, he made the ghastly mistake of telling them that he knew nothing of the window having ever been nailed up. If he'd said it had been, and given some plausible reason for it, Wright might well have thought no more of it. However. It could only have been nailed up as a precaution against someone popping into Stephen's room and looking through into Millicent's. Therefore the murder must have been done while there were still people in the office—and even the partners never stayed much later than 6 P.M. on a Friday. Therefore the time of the murder could reasonably be narrowed down to between 5:20 and 6."

Clare gave Basil Ryle some more brandy. Ever since coming to the studio, he had eyed her from time to time in an incredulous way, as though he found it difficult to identify her with the dummy of Nigel's macabre reconstruction. Now he said,

"I'm afraid I never took to Stephen very much. Couldn't discover what made him tick. And of course he was one of the old guard, while I was in the firm on sufferance—a brash little clever scholarship boy. But I'd never have thought he'd try to incriminate me."

"He didn't."

"But that razor—"

"The razor was planted in your room by Liz Wenham."

"Liz? Oh, come off it!"

"Liz had a very soft spot for Stephen Protheroe—that was obvious to me from the start. She's an extremely intelligent woman, so she had no difficulty in perceiving the strength of the case I was building against Stephen, or in picking up the hints I let fall to her about it. Moreover, her love for

him had made her instinctively aware of his hatred for Millicent. I believe she suspected him first during that dinner party in the Geraldines' flat."

"How so?"

"You remember, I mentioned the telephone call Gleed had made to his mother the day before the murder—the one fixing an appointment with her at his flat. Stephen said he 'couldn't have heard what she said.' I caught a curious, apprehensive look on Liz's face just after. My guess is that she'd been in Stephen's room when that telephone call came through, and heard it because the sliding window was open; so why, she wondered, did Stephen say *he* had not heard the conversation? Anyway, when I interviewed her last, she could not conceal her worry about Stephen, and I deliberately dropped some clanging hints. On my way out, I overheard her ringing him up, asking him to lunch. Heaven knows what passed between them—Stephen wouldn't consciously let anything out, I'm sure—but her suspicion was confirmed, and—"

"But why should she pick on *me?*" asked Ryle irritably

"You've already answered that: because you were not one of the old guard—not a Wenham, or a Geraldine, or a Protheroe. And she loved Stephen, in her peculiar way. Anything to divert suspicion from him. Now, *outside* the job, Liz is a naïve, unworldly type. And impulsive. On an impulse to protect Stephen, she rummaged out that old-fashioned razor—belonged to her father, no doubt—her house is a museum of Wenham relics; she cut herself with it, then rushed off to plant it in your room at the office It was she who asked for that file to be looked out on Monday morning"

"Well, I must say—" began Ryle in an aggrieved tone that sounded faintly absurd.

"No doubt she's very ashamed of herself now—of being so incompetent as to suppose that the police wouldn't have searched your room thoroughly enough to find it. But, as I say, she did it on the spur of the moment, panicking about Stephen. And it would fit in with the theory that you'd killed Miss Miles in a brainstorm. There's a lot of ruthlessness in Liz; she's a monomaniac, you must remember, about the firm's reputation; and the only other thing in life she was devoted to was Stephen."

Basil Ryle gave Nigel an almost inimical look "While we're talking about ruthlessness—"

"Oh, Geraldine's the same in his way But he's got a softer center He'd been shaking in his shoes about an early episode with Miss Miles. There are two versions of it, and I don't give a damn which is the true one. He had to use Liz as an intermediary to convey his own version to me He's a moral coward; but he had no motive conceivably strong enough for murder."

"I'm not talking about Geraldine. I'm talking about your demonstration this evening. Was it necessary to put Stephen through that ordeal? Damn it, man, it was absolutely sadistic. Surely the police would have got him sooner or later? Traced his purchases of the false beard and the duffel coat?"

"Yes, I expect they would," replied Nigel mildly, "once they started inquiring for Stephen in connection with them, instead of Cyprian Gleed."

"Well then, how can you justify that melodramatic business this evening? It was like—like torturing a man to soften him up for a confession."

"For God's sake, Mr. Ryle!" Clare's voice trembled with indignation. "Don't you even understand that? Do you think Nigel was enjoying himself?" She rose, with a swirl of black hair, and stood over Basil Ryle. "You've said it yourself—the police would have got him 'sooner or later.' But it had to be sooner. For your sake." Clare stamped her foot. "*Your* sake. Nigel was afraid for you—for what might happen to you if you were left in suspense any longer, wondering whether you hadn't done it in a brainstorm. That's why Stephen Protheroe had to be broken down quickly. You should be grateful to him, instead of taking up this sentimental attitude toward—"

"All right, all right. I'm sorry. Really I never thought—" Basil Ryle offered Nigel his hand; then, with a glance at Clare and a glint of his old perkiness, added, "You're a lucky chap."

THE WIDOW'S CRUISE

For Peter and Louise

" 'Tis double death to drown in ken of shore."

SHAKESPEARE

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PROLOGUE

There was something wrong with the swans that May afternoon. A chilly, tetchy wind rasped over the Serpentine, ruffling their feathers and unsettling, it seemed, their nerves. They could not keep still. A swan rose heraldically upright, splatting the water with cumbrous, half-arm blows, then tore unprovoked at a companion which had been gloomily surveying its reflection, and chased it out of sight beyond the bridge. Another swan, in a state of manic exasperation, kept pecking viciously at something under its lifted wing—an action which caused it to careen and flounder, feathers disorganized, neck like a snake striking. Several other swans, as if swept by mass hysteria, began to dig themselves furiously in the ribs.

"Do you suppose they have ants in their armpits?" asked Clare

"I think they're having a nervous breakdown," Nigel replied.

"Well, if they are, they're overdoing it badly."

"Or it could be a form of neuromimesis."

"Whatever it is, it's extremely undignified," said Clare Massinger severely.

"You can't expect even a swan to be dignified when it's got an itch. I don't suppose Zeus looked very dignified when he was assaulting Leda."

"That was different."

A swan plodded from the Serpentine onto dry land, stretching out its neck for a piece of bread proffered by a nursemaid.

"It looks like an Edwardian hat trying to walk," remarked Clare. Her long, blue-black hair swirled like smoke in a gust of wind, and turning away she found herself confronting the Peter Pan statue, which she contemplated in silence for a period of time.

"You know," she said at last, "it has a lack of fascination all its own."

As they walked away arm in arm toward Lancaster Gate, Clare reverted to the queer manifestation they had just witnessed.

"Don't you think we ought to do something about them, darling?"

"The swans? What?"

"Well, ring somebody up and tell them the birds are verminous or demented or whatever it is. Who's responsible for them?"

"Oh, the Board of Works, I dare say, or the L.C.C. I've no idea. But that's reminded me I rang up Swan's this morning. All their Hellenic

cruises are booked up for this year. I've put our names down, in case any of the passengers cry off. But I think we ought to try for one of this new series of cruises Michael was talking about It'd mean starting from Athens instead of Venice; but we could have a few days in Athens first, by ourselves."

Clare Massinger had recently come to that point, which nearly every artist experiences two or three times in a working life, when the reservoir seems empty and some radical change of style or content necessary if the work is not to become a meaningless repetition of past achievement. In Greece, she felt, she might refresh her vision as a sculptor and recharge her batteries. Since neither she nor Nigel could speak the language, some sort of conducted tour would be the best way to get what she needed, in the limited time they had at their disposal.

She agreed now that they should inquire about the cruises which had just been started by the Prytanis line. Nigel Strangeways visited the Greek Tourist Office next morning. There were berths available on the S.S. *Menelaos*, he was told, sailing from Athens on September 1. The ship would visit Delos and then a number of islands in the Dodecanese, returning to the mainland by way of Crete, with expeditions to Epidaurus, Mycenae, and Delphi. The passengers would be mainly British and American, but there was a small party of French also, and a sprinkling of Germans and Italians. There were to be Greek guides on board, and several lecturers of European reputation, including a distinguished Byzantine scholar, the Bishop of Solway, and that famous Hellenophile and popularizer of classical Greek literature, Jeremy Street.

Nigel had no hesitation in booking passages The itinerary of the *Menelaos*, taking in so many islands whose very names had the ring of legend, sounded altogether admirable. Clare's dark eyes lit up when he told her where they would be going Nigel felt no premonition that this itinerary would carry him into a labyrinth of human motives darker and more complex than the dwelling of the Minotaur.

EMBARKATION

Sixteen weeks later, Nigel was leaning on the rail of the promenade deck, looking at the shipping in the Piraeus. This morning he and Clare had paid a last visit to the Theater of Dionysus and the Acropolis. The heat—it was nearly 100 degrees in the shade—and the perfect majesty of the Parthenon had silenced them. Even Clare's inordinate appetite for sight-seeing was temporarily sated; so, after a leisurely lunch, they took a taxi to the Piraeus, with the view of settling in before the mass of passengers arrived.

The *Menelaos* had been lying at the quayside for thirty-six hours and the cabins were suffocatingly hot. Opening the porthole of Clare's, which adjoined his own on the main deck, was enough to bring Nigel out in a profuse sweat. Clare announced that she was going to have a stripwash, and then "get everything ship-shape"—a procedure which would involve, Nigel had no doubt, unpacking and strewing her clothes all over her own bunk and that of her fellow-occupant, a Miss E Jamieson, B.A., who had fortunately not yet turned up. Nigel left her to it, fought his way through a blast of heat to open the porthole of his own cabin, which, the passenger list told him, he would be sharing with Dr Stephen Plunket, M.D., M Sc., neatly disposed his belongings, and came out on deck gasping for air Having filled in time investigating the main features of the vessel—the two saloons, forward and aft, the bars (not open yet), the small swimming pool (still dry) on the forecastle beneath the bridge—Nigel took up his position at the port rail of the promenade deck amidships.

Beneath him, a flat tanker was oiling the *Menelaos* through an umbilical cord of pipeline. Beyond, the blue and white flags of three Greek corvettes, moored together, rippled in a light breeze that had risen There were three passenger vessels, their white paint dazzling in the Athenian sunlight, lying stem to stern at the quays opposite, one of these, the S.S. *Adriatici*, was the ship chartered by Swan's on which Nigel had unsuccessfully tried to get berths for Clare and himself. A large P. & O. cruise liner, with a single funnel like a huge yellow pepper pot, was getting up steam. Some weather-beaten tramp steamers, a gaggle of assorted small craft, warehouses, ship cranes and the hazy blue-white sky made up the rest of the scene In the air hung a pervasive smell—fumes from the tanker mingled with an odor of,

was it Greek cooking, or decaying vegetables, or both? It might be convenient, thought Nigel, that he was sharing a cabin with the ship's doctor.

Nigel tried to imagine this place in the fifth century, with the triremes coming in and the Long Walls running up to Athens; but the heat had taken all the spring out of his imagination. A sudden outburst of sound, from the other side of the *Menelaos,* broke into his thoughts. Moving over to the starboard side and looking down on the quay to which the ship was moored, Nigel saw a truck laden with rectangular chunks of ice. A sailor, standing on a makeshift cradle hung from the deck, was passing these into the ship through a porthole, one by one, as they were handed up to him. A violent altercation had blown up between the overseer of the shore party handling the ice and a ship's officer who was leaning over the rail twenty feet away from Nigel. Whether the ice had arrived late, or was the wrong shape, or whether the two disputants just disliked each other's faces, Nigel had no means of determining. But the scene could not have been more dramatic if it had been leading up to the crisis of an ancestral blood feud. At one point the ship's officer actually tore his hair in despair—a gesture Nigel had not witnessed since attending an Q U.D.S. performance of *Oedipus* thirty years ago. What most impressed him, though, was the rhythm of the exchanges The officer shouted, in the staccato, stabbing language of his nation, accompanying the speech with a wealth of murderous gesture, while the overseer stood listening. Then the overseer screamed back, dancing hysterically on his feet as though at any moment he might rise into the air and strangle the officer, while the latter heard him out, chewing his brigand-like mustache. Strophe and antistrophe, thought Nigel; the noble Athenian tradition of argument—of listening to your opponent's case as well as voicing your own It was this sort of thing, Nigel realized, which made your heart warm to the Greeks—made you love them, passionately, indiscriminately, and forever.

"Is blood going to flow?" came the light, high voice of Clare beside him

"Oh, you're here. No, they're just having a little difference of opinion about ice."

The combatants shrieked at each other, alternately, for a few minutes longer. Then, as abruptly as it had blown up, the storm ended. The overseer spat at the virgin-white side of the ship; the officer made a gesture which might have expressed the whole tragedy of King Lear, and turned away. Honor was satisfied, emotion exhausted.

On the quay below, emerging from buses and taxis, passengers were now beginning to arrive. They had to run the gantlet of a horde of hucksters, selling everything from Greek vases (twentieth century) to lemonade, from

hunks of pink melon to Evzone dolls. Nigel and Clare played the time-honored travelers' game of speculating about the characters, professions, and provenance of these still unknown fellow-travelers. They had just spotted a Royal Academician (who later proved to be the Bishop of Solway) and a trio of classical schoolmasters (who turned out to be, respectively, an analytical chemist, a barrister, and a civil servant), when their attention was drawn by two women strolling slowly toward the gangway Or, rather, by one of them Of middle height, her graceful carriage minimizing a certain stockiness of figure, with high cheekbones and charming hollows beneath them, and a delicate brown complexion that, when she came closer, showed itself as a triumph of cosmetic art, this woman had that air of sexual awareness which tells its own story. She wore a lemon-colored linen suit and a wide white straw hat.

"Oh look!" said Clare. "Here comes the ship's *femme fatale.*"

The woman's companion, though of the same height, seemed dumpy in comparison She wore a puce-colored jumper which emphasized the muddiness of her skin, a rumpled tweed skirt, and serviceable shoes. The general effect of a badly done-up parcel was heightened by untidy hair, a shambling gait, and restless, spasmodic gestures As she looked up at the ship, her mouth jerked uncontrollably, and she put up a hand as if to hold it still It was at this moment that Nigel heard a girl, standing at the rail beside him, exclaim:

"Oh God! Peter, look! There's the Bross. What on earth is she doing here?"

"The Bross?"

"Miss Ambrose. You know."

There was such dismay in the girl's voice that Nigel looked up sharply The girl had gone white; her thin body was hunched, almost as if she expected a blow, and her hands were clenched on the rail. She was sixteen or seventeen, Nigel judged, and the boy with her was obviously her brother —a twin brother, very likely.

"Don't worry, Faith," he said, taking her arm. "She's seeing somebody off, I expect."

"It'll spoil everything if—"

"Don't be a goat. She can't eat you."

"Look, she's coming up the gangway." The girl ducked her head—a queer, involuntary movement—then hurried away down the deck, her brother following her with a grim look on his face which Nigel was to remember.

The oddly assorted couple were now climbing the gangway. As she

handed in her embarkation card, the beauty threw the purser a dazzling, slightly lopsided smile which gave character to her exquisitely made-up face. Her companion, eyes averted, shuffled past, and the pair went off toward their cabin, followed by stewards carrying their luggage.

"Well, what do you make of them? A rich divorcée traveling with her secretary?"

"They're sisters," said Clare firmly.

"*Sisters?* Oh, nonsense!"

"Yes. Identical bone structure One's a successful *mondaine,* the other a neurotic. That's what put you off. I look at the skull beneath the skin "

"You should know. One of them is Miss Ambrose, anyway; a schoolmistress, probably, judging by our young friend's consternation just now. That'd be the sallow, twitching one. Let's look at the passenger list."

This document, which had been handed to them on embarking, showed that Cabin 3 on A deck was to be occupied by Mrs Melissa Blaydon and Miss Ianthe Ambrose.

"Well, they may be sisters," said Nigel. "Those elegant, classical Christian names suggest one father But I still think it's perverse of the expensive Melissa to be holidaying with a string bag like Ianthe."

"Perversity makes strange bedfellows."

"Ambrose. Ambrose. I wonder could it be E. K. Ambrose?"

"Who's he?"

"He was a very distinguished Greek scholar. Did definitive editions of Euripides. I read them at Oxford."

II

During the several hours that elapsed before dinner, the passengers began to sort themselves out National characteristics were soon in evidence. The blond individuals, slung around with cameras, haversacks, and guidebooks, who marched purposefully up and down the boat deck, could only be Germans The French contingent, who had brought their own lecturer, gravitated together at one end of the forward saloon, where they chattered incessantly, ignoring their fellow-travelers. A few Italian men, dressed in flashy lounge suits, strolled about the ship escorting their wives and regarding with brilliant admiration every other personable female in sight. The Americans waited for the bars to open, while the British tried to avoid one another, glancing in a furtive and resentful manner at anyone they suspected of a tendency to interrupt their interminable postcard writing

There were exceptions of course. A fat-faced man got into conversation with Nigel and Clare, introducing himself as Ivor Bentinck-Jones. He was no stranger in these parts, he told them, and if they wanted to know the ropes, he was their man. With his twinkling eyes, jolly voice, and evidently unsnubbable nature, Mr. Bentinck-Jones was cut out to be the life and soul of the ship. His eagerness to make friends, though a little pathetic, was not unlikable. He seemed the sort of man, thought Nigel, who would attract confidences as a beggar attracts charity.

"Are you quite satisfied with your cabin?" the man presently asked. "If not, Nikki would change it for you, I'm sure. He's the cruise manager, you know."

"Our cabins are quite comfortable, thank you," replied Clare.

"Oh, I see. Good. Sorry—I thought you were traveling together."

"So we are."

A momentarily discouraged look came into the man's eye. Clare felt quite bad at depriving him of the mild pleasure he would have derived from meeting a couple living in sin on shipboard. "We are just good friends," she satirically added.

"Hello, there's Jeremy Street." Ivor Bentinck-Jones waved at a man who was approaching—a tall, distinguished figure, with a young-old face, thinning golden hair, and the consciously unobtrusive manner of a celebrity who knows his own market value and does not need to assert it. Jeremy Street wore an immaculate white linen suit, a royal-blue shirt, and a silk neckerchief, the ensemble giving him the appearance of one of those would-be U types to be found in a Harrod's catalogue.

"Met him on the train," confided Bentinck-Jones. "Delightful fellow. No side at all. . . . Ah, Street, let me introduce you. Mr Jeremy Street. Miss Clare Massinger. Mr. Nigel Strangeways."

The three murmured politely at one another.

"It's a great pleasure to meet you," said the newcomer to Clare. "I saw your last exhibition. Such strength and delicacy. That Madonna particularly. The earthy touched with the divine—as it should be"

Jeremy Street's voice was almost too melodious, his respectful yet manly tone almost too perfectly suitable. A faint qualm of distaste, perceptible only to Nigel, came and went on Clare's face

"Hello, hello, hello," caroled Ivor Bentinck-Jones. "Another celebrity on board. You're a painter, Miss Massinger?"

"Sculptor."

"Well, you've come to the fountainhead of European art," he proclaimed.

"So I'm told," said Clare.

" 'The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece, where burning Sappho loved and sung,' " continued Mr. Bentinck-Jones, his pudgy face convulsed with enthusiasm. "What inspiration! But it is not your first visit, I am sure."

"Yes. My first visit."

"Well, well. And under what better auspices than those of the renowned Jeremy Street?"

The renowned Jeremy Street glanced apologetically at Clare, his mobile mouth twitching at one corner. There was a limit, perhaps, to his capacity for being lionized.

"And may we expect another translation from your pen in the near future?" inquired Mr. Bentinck-Jones.

"I've just finished the *Hippolytus.*"

"Ah. One of Sophocles' most noble works."

"Euripides, actually."

"Euripides, of course. What an absurd slip of the tongue."

Nigel asked, "What text have you used? E. K Ambrose, I suppose."

The question could hardly have been more innocuous. But Nigel was instantly aware that, somehow, it had given offense. The wrinkled, young-old face went tight, with a huffy, defensive look.

"Ambrose was very sound," he said, "but somewhat lacking in imaginative sympathy. One wonders sometimes if these classical academics have the faintest idea what goes on in a poet's mind."

"There's an Ianthe Ambrose on board," said Nigel. "I wonder if—"

"What? I.A.?" The words seemed to explode out of Jeremy Street before he could check them.

"You know her?"

"Not personally," answered the lecturer with repressive hauteur, and shortly bade them *au revoir.*

Nigel was left with two impressions that the unfortunate Ianthe Ambrose must have the gift of making enemies; and that Ivor Bentinck-Jones had not merely sensed Jeremy Street's discomposure at her presence on board, but had obscurely relished it. No doubt, as with most busybodies, there was a streak of malice in his make-up.

"I suspect they're both phonies," Clare was murmuring.

"Phonies? Who?"

"Our Jeremy and our Ivor. Jeremy is vain as a peacock but probably harmless. Ivor, on the other hand—"

"Well? What's wrong with him?"

"He thought the *Hippolytus* was written by Sophocles And did you

notice how he was pumping us? If we knew what was going on behind that jolly façade, I'm not at all sure we should like it. And his eyes are too small."

Whatever Mr. Bentinck-Jones's propensities might be, Jeremy Street was soon to appear in an unexpected light. Clare had gone below to fetch her sketching block, and Nigel was strolling along the promenade deck. As he passed a window of the reading room, which adjoined the B saloon aft, his eye was caught by a figure within. It was Jeremy Street. Something warily insouciant in his pose reminded Nigel of a shoplifter he had once spotted in the act. Street's back was turned to the window; his hand went out to a beige-covered magazine which lay on the table before him and whipped it inside his coat. That beige cover was not unfamiliar to Nigel. Why, he wondered as he moved on, should a distinguished lecturer on classical subjects possess himself, in so guilty a fashion, of the *Journal of Classical Studies?* There seemed to be only one answer; unless the man was a straight kleptomaniac, he had taken the *Journal* away from the reading room to prevent fellow-passengers reading it. An ineffective precaution surely, though, for on a cruise of this sort it was pretty certain that some passengers would have brought copies of their own. Nigel made a mental note to procure a copy of the quarterly; he had already formed a theory as to why Jeremy Street should have abstracted it, but he liked verifying his conjectures.

III

Dinner in the A saloon was nearly over. Nigel and Clare had been assigned to a table whose other occupants were the Bishop of Solway and his wife, Mrs. Hale The Bishop's white vandyke beard, which had made them mistake him for an R.A., wagged as vigorously over his food as his wife's tongue wagged over their fellow-passengers. Already, in a few hours, she had somehow accumulated several dossiers; and where her actual knowledge was deficient, her imagination readily filled the gaps.

"My dear Tilly," her husband had protested at one point, "Miss Massinger will think you're a terrible gossip."

"I never gossip, Edwin. I am gossiped *to* It all comes of looking so fat and comfy and normal. I'm a Mum figure—everyone coughs it up in my lap."

"Little do they know your real nature," remarked the Bishop darkly.

Mrs Hale did indeed resemble a vivacious roly-poly at first sight; but

there was a smoldering, sardonic glint in her eyes which should have warned the unwary.

"Have you met Beauty and the Beast yet?" she asked, glancing across to the table where Mrs Blaydon and Miss Ambrose sat.

"No," said Clare. "They are sisters, aren't they?"

"Yes. Miss Ambrose is a schoolteacher—classics She's had a nervous breakdown and her sister has brought her on this cruise to convalesce. I would think it'd rather cramp Mrs. Blaydon's style, having the woman around all the time."

"Cramp her style?" inquired Nigel.

"Melissa Blaydon is the Merry Widow *de nos jours*—"

"Actually a widow?"

"Yes. And it's quite apparent to me that she has only one interest in life. Men. They've started to swarm around her already. But Ianthe Ambrose positively growls and bares her teeth at them. I can't see Mrs. Blaydon getting much shipboard romance."

"My dear Tilly," remarked the Bishop. "Only a contortionist could commit misconduct in these packing cases they call cabins here, anyway."

"My husband does not talk like this at diocesan conferences," his wife reassured them.

The Bishop of Solway gave a sharp bark of laughter, his blue eyes twinkling. "You've no idea how I talk at diocesan conferences." He beamed at his wife with great affection.

"How do you know all this about Mrs. Blaydon?" Clare asked.

"She happened to be sitting next to me on the boat deck before dinner, and a podgy little man called Bentinck-Jones got into conversation with her."

"Ah ha," said Clare "She told him about her sister? He's got a quite insatiable curiosity about other people's lives, I suspect. You'd better watch out."

"Oh, my life's an open book," Mrs. Hale declared.

"An open book," said her husband, "filled with improper pictures. You would hardly credit how luxuriant an imagination my wife has, Miss Massinger. It comes of the humdrum life she has to lead with me in the Palace." He patted his bearded mouth with his napkin, and glanced mischievously at his wife. "Their father and I were Fellows of the same college in the old days. There's nothing I can't tell you about the Ambrose sisters, when they were children."

"Well, really, Edwin! Why have you been keeping this from us?"

The Bishop's expression changed. "It's rather a sad story. I don't intend to rake it up, even for you, Tilly."

"They remind me of a poem by Edwin Muir," said Nigel, after a pause, he had been covertly eying the sisters. "It's about two creatures, inveterate enemies, which have to fight each other, over and over again. One is 'the crested animal in its pride, arrayed in all the royal hues.' The other is—how does it go?—'a soft round beast as brown as clay'—'a battered bag he might have been.' Muir dreamed about them, I believe, while he was being psychoanalyzed."

"And which won?" the Bishop's wife asked.

"The beautiful crested animal always wins, but it can never kill its enemy."

A queer little silence came over their table. Nigel was conscious of the Bishop's eyes upon him.

"You're right about one thing," said the latter at last. But what Nigel was right about did not emerge, for at this moment a loud, metallic voice silenced all conversation in the saloon

At the far end, a man was speaking through a microphone

"My name is Nikolaides. I am your cruise manager. Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to Greece and the *Menelaos.* I hope you shall all have a mighty fine cruise."

The man paused to distribute dazzling smiles to the customers, and Mrs. Hale was heard to mutter, "The Billy Butlin of the Aegean He'll be calling us 'lads and lasses' any moment."

Mr. Nikolaides resumed, speaking fluently in an American accent. He told them where his office was, announced the plans for tomorrow's expedition at Delos, urged them to bring any complaints to him personally, and begged them all to call him Nikki.

He was a broad-shouldered man of medium height, with a swarthy, clean-shaven face, flashing white teeth, black oiled hair that shone like a tarmac road after rain, and a personality whose magnetism could be felt the whole length of the saloon.

"And now," he concluded, "has anyone any questions to ask me?"

"Yes What time is this ship actually going to start?" The questioner was, of all people, Ianthe Ambrose. Her voice was slurred, deepish, peremptory; and, though the question was not in itself offensive, she contrived to make it sound thoroughly disagreeable. The tension in the woman communicated itself to all the diners, who shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, avoiding one another's eyes Only Nikki seemed unaffected.

"In a couple of hours' time," he said. "We are delayed because the oil

tanker arrived late. But do not worry. We shall catch up with our schedule O.K."

He walked now from table to table, greeting the passengers individually. At the table where Melissa and Ianthe sat, he paused rather longer; he spoke reassuringly to the latter, but while he did so his eyes kept returning to her sister One can almost see a spark in the air where their glances meet, thought Nigel. Melissa Blaydon's profile, set off by the Indian headscarf she wore, was ravishing in its purity of line. The little tableau was broken up by a movement of Ianthe's hand—an abrupt, seemingly involuntary movement which knocked over a wineglass. Nikki snapped his fingers, a steward hurried to the table, Ianthe's sallow face darkened unbecomingly.

When he came over to their own table, Nikki greeted the Bishop of Solway and his wife respectfully, then bowed over Clare's hand, his eyes alight with a frank, almost animal admiration. There was an innocence about it, a sort of pagan *joie de vivre* in his whole face, which disarmed one, and, though his manner was deferential, it lacked any trace of obsequiousness.

"What nice eyes he has," said Clare when Nikki had moved away. "Like prunes soaked in electricity."

The Bishop gave his sharp grunt of laughter.

Mrs. Hale said, "A bull A shining bull. He was almost pawing the ground."

"Well, as long as he doesn't paw me," Clare murmured.

"Extraordinary—how the Greeks have kept their old tradition of independence," said the Bishop. "Poor but proud. Look at the stewards. Not like waiters at all. Free men. It's in their bearing, and stamped on their faces."

"Something to do with the austere way of life they have to live?" suggested Nigel. "It makes for simplicity, for staying unspoiled. Nikki, for instance; he's built on simple lines, I'd say, like a Homeric hero "

"I don't much like their Homeric coffee," said Mrs Hale, sipping distastefully. "Whatever can it be made of?"

"Grumble, grumble, grumble," her husband remarked.

IV

They were sitting on the afterdeck, under the arc lights and the stars. From a café beyond the quays, a loudspeaker bellowed dance music, drown-

ing the murmur of conversation all around them. Passengers sauntered up and down, or leaned over the rail, waiting for the ship to start.

Clare put her hand on Nigel's, sighing. "I'm glad we're here, darling."

"Yes."

"And I like the Bish and Mrs. They're a good advertisement for marriage."

"We're lucky to have them for table-mates. Have you come across your cabin companion yet?"

"Yes. Quite harmless She teaches Greek somewhere—some university. She's brought quite a library of books and magazines with her. Funny, coming to Greece to read."

"Well, you might borrow the current number of the *Journal of Classical Studies* from her, if she has it. Don't forget."

"All right. Why?"

"I could fancy a read of it at breakfast tomorrow. Hello, who's this?"

A small girl—she might have been ten years old—had drifted along the deck and come to anchor opposite them. Her fattish, shapeless body struck Nigel as being a replica, in miniature, of Ianthe Ambrose's. She wore an embroidered blouse and a serge skirt, over which hung what appeared to be a sporran. She had a notebook in her hand as she stood there, regarding them expressionlessly through thick-glassed spectacles

"Well, and who are you?" asked Nigel.

The child advanced till she was all but standing on Nigel's feet, before replying, in a clear, pedantic tone, "My name is Primrose Chalmers Who are you?"

"I am Nigel Strangeways, and this is Clare Massinger."

The child paused to record the information in her notebook.

"Are you married?" she then inquired

"No."

"Living together?"

Nigel reached out and pretended to snip off the child's nose between first and second fingers.

"Castration symbolism, that is," the child bleakly announced

Nigel withdrew his hand as if he had been stung. Clare giggled.

"What on earth do you know about—?"

"My father and mother are lay analysts," said Primrose Chalmers.

"Well, isn't that nice!" Clare remarked. "Are they traveling with you?"

"Yes. I have been in analysis myself for seven years."

"I'm not surpr—" Clare bit it off. "That's a long time. You must be

madly normal by now. And here you are in Greece, at the source of the Oedipus complex."

Primrose scowled at her, and made an entry in the notebook.

"Hey, hey! There's a chiel amang us taking notes," came the voice of Mr. Bentinck-Jones from nearby.

"What do you write in your book?" asked Nigel.

"I am compiling data about the passengers, with a view to an essay on group psychology," the formidable child answered.

"Crikey! Don't you ever take a holiday?"

Primrose deemed this question unworthy of reply. Turning to Ivor Bentinck-Jones, she began the questionnaire.

"I think, if you're going to Gallup poll me, young lady," he said with a wink at Nigel, "it had better be done in private."

"It's not a Gallup poll," Primrose severely corrected him. But, putting away notebook and fountain pen in her sporran, she walked off with the obliging Bentinck-Jones.

"Well, what next? Poor wretched child."

"Two children," said Clare, surveying the retreating backs of Ivor and Primrose. "A couple of inquisitive children. They'll get on famously."

"That's what worries me. Shan't be long, love." Nigel pulled himself out of his deck chair and sauntered slowly after the figures of Primrose Chalmers and Ivor Bentinck-Jones. Nigel's passionate curiosity about human beings was accompanied by a deep distrust of persons who, outside their professional capacities, manifested the same curiosity. Experience had taught him that such curiosity is seldom disinterested. Bentinck-Jones, for instance; he might just be the fulsome, pathetic lonely heart he appeared to be; or a genuine child-lover whose heart was big enough to include even the rebarbative Primrose. Or again, he might not

At a respectful distance, Nigel followed the pair along the portside of the boat deck. They climbed a ladder up to the bridge deck. When Nigel arrived there, they had disappeared. On his left was a row of deck houses, the quarters of the *Menelaos'* officers. He passed between them and a ship's boat into an open space of deck forward of the bridge and beneath it, and walked around to the starboard side. Here too a single ship's boat was accommodated. Passengers were sitting or strolling here, but not the two he had followed Perhaps they had gone into the radio room, aft of the Captain's cabin. Nigel peered in. The room was empty. They must have gone up the portside ladder only to descend the starboard one. But then, why should Bentinck-Jones have brought Primrose up here at all?

Nigel had reached the head of the starboard ladder again when he heard

a low voice. Bentinck-Jones's It came from the far side of the ship's boat. The man must have found a space between the boat and the rail, where he and Primrose could have a private confabulation. He was speaking in a whisper now, so that Nigel missed a good deal of what he was saying. But what Nigel did hear was sufficiently intriguing.

". . . you can help me. I'm in the Secret Service. . . Two EOKA agents on board—don't know which of the passengers . . . might be a woman. . . . Nobody would suspect you . . . Keep your eyes and ears open . . . anything anyone says or does . . . suspicious . . . agents may try to make contact with. . . . Write it down in your notebook. . . . Anything that strikes you as odd, in the way people behave or . . . you never know what . . . pieces of jigsaw puzzle. Got the idea?"

"Yes I see." Primrose sounded excited, as well she might. "And I'm to tell you—"

"Ssh! It's got to be a deadly secret between us. . . . I'll tell you when I . . . no dropping hints in public when we meet . . . anyone see your notebook. It's a bargain, then? Good girl. Cut along, then . . . mustn't be seen together too much."

Nigel moved smartly away. He was very thoughtful as he walked around beneath the bridge and descended the portside ladder to the boat deck Ivor Bentinck-Jones's game might be just a game—something to amuse the child and take her mind off psychoanalysis. But there were less innocuous possibilities. One thing was certain—Secret Service agents did not reveal their profession to young schoolgirls. The man might, of course, be one of those harmless if tiresome characters who need grandiose fantasies to support their egos. Perhaps this Secret Service nonsense was a game he played seriously with himself.

Well, thought Nigel, time will show. Time did show, all too soon and all disastrously.

V

When Nigel returned to the afterdeck where he had left Clare he found the chairs beside her occupied by Mrs. Blaydon and her sister. Clare introduced Nigel, and he sat down at her feet, saying·

"Primrose Chalmers has just been enrolled in the Secret Service."

"Now what can you mean by that?" asked Clare, without any pressing curiosity.

"It sounds like something in a game," said Mrs. Blaydon.

"I hope it is."

Melissa Blaydon's long lashes fluttered at Nigel. She was clearly puzzled by this unconventional opening, and a little piqued that Nigel did not enlarge upon it. Her sister, sprawling lumpishly in the deck chair, seemed at first to be preoccupied with some inner argument; her greeny-brown eyes, which had not met Nigel's when they were introduced, stared at nothing in particular, her mouth twitched, and her fingers made little writhing movements in her lap But, as the desultory conversation went on, Nigel began to get an impression that Ianthe Ambrose was not altogether bogged down in her own misery. Behind the collapsed façade, there was concealed an occupant both intelligent and attentive to what was going on. Once or twice she broke in with an incisive remark which showed her intelligence and had the effect of puncturing the subject. Her secret attentiveness, if it was not merely an effect of her inner tension, was more difficult to define; but Nigel presently got the feeling that it was directed against himself—that Ianthe Ambrose was playing the watchdog over her sister, ready to snap at any man who approached Melissa too close. Ianthe could simply be a man-hater; or there might be some more subtle source of jealousy involved.

Melissa herself he found rather a disappointment. Not that, at close quarters, her beauty was diminished; the curves and hollows of her animated face were exquisite, reminding him of Yeats's lines, "Did quattrocento finger fashion it Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind And took a mess of shadows for its meat?" Her hands, too, were thin and graceful, though they might grow clawlike with the years But Melissa Blaydon had very little, it seemed, inside that beautiful head Her animation was artificial, her conversation that of a woman who has had her thinking done for her by others. It consisted largely in name-dropping and an enumeration of the places she had lived in and visited Did they know Cannes well? Were not the shops in Rome absolute heaven? Capri had been ruined since Farouk went there. Greece, for Mrs. Blaydon, was chiefly distinguished as the birthplace of the Onassis brothers.

On the face of it, Melissa was no more than a spoiled, silly, selfish woman of the world Yet, thought Nigel, she has taken time off from her futile life to bring this unprepossessing sister to a country in which she herself can have little interest. Natural sisterly affection? Guilt for past neglect? The latter, possibly, for it emerged in conversation that Mrs. Blaydon had been living in various places abroad ever since her marriage fifteen years ago.

"My sister has always wanted to visit Greece. She's the clever one of the family, you know. Father passed on all his brains to her."

A spasm of pain distorted Ianthe's face. She seemed about to blurt out something, but restrained herself.

"Your father was E. K. Ambrose?" said Nigel.

Melissa opened her eyes wide at him. "Oh, you knew him?"

"Only by reputation."

"My sister is following in his footsteps. I don't know why you haven't been asked to give some lectures on board, Ianthe."

"Oh, I couldn't compete with the great Jeremy Street."

"You don't approve of him?" ventured Nigel.

Ianthe's lifeless face suddenly sprang into animation, and for the first time Nigel saw that she and Melissa, as Clare had claimed, bore a close resemblance to each other beneath the surface.

"Approve of him? My dear man, Street is an absolute charlatan. He picks other people's brains and then makes a mess of them. He simply has no conception of scholarship whatsoever."

As if this outburst had exhausted her, Miss Ambrose relapsed into apathy.

It was a few minutes later that Nigel observed approaching along the deck the blond girl who had taken fright when Ianthe Ambrose and her sister came up the gangway. Her brother was with her On seeing Miss Ambrose now, she stopped dead, gripped her brother's arm, pulled him around, and began to walk away A glance at Miss Ambrose told Nigel that she had not noticed this. The boy shook off his sister's hand. She disappeared from view; but the boy leaned with his back to the rail, fixedly gazing in the direction of Melissa and Ianthe His face was in shadow But Melissa Blaydon at once became conscious of his scrutiny

"I'm going to have trouble with that young man," she announced in her deep, lazy voice.

"What young man?" asked Ianthe sharply.

"Over there. He keeps following me about and staring at me."

"Who is he?"

"I've no idea."

"His name is Peter," said Nigel "And he has a sister called Faith "

"Faith what? Is she on board, do you mean?" Ianthe said, in her most peremptory voice.

"Yes I don't know their surname. A blond girl, sixteen or seventeen Rather pretty, but she has irregular teeth and a stoop "

As if aware that her last question had been extremely brusque, Ianthe spoke more forthcomingly. "Sounds as if it could be one of my ex-pupils.

Faith Trubody I seem to remember she has a twin brother. And why are you going to have trouble with him, Melissa?"

"He makes eyes at me. I seem to attract the young. It's becoming quite a nuisance, at my age. Perhaps I'm fated to be a cradle-snatcher." She laughed, giving Nigel a rueful look. "You'll have to rescue me from him. The young do bore me so." There was a subtly caressive note in her voice, like a waft of some extremely delicate yet voluptuous perfume; and such was her sexual potency that, for a moment, the two other women sitting there might not have existed.

"Yes, here we are." Clare had consulted the passenger list. "Mr. Arthur Trubody, C.B E., Peter Trubody, Faith Trubody. An ex-pupil, did you say she is?"

"Faith was not a very satisfactory girl, I'm afraid," Miss Ambrose replied, with a curious shake in her voice which was not lost on Nigel. "I'm very tired, Melissa. Are you going to stay up here all night?"

"Oh, don't let's go to bed yet. The air is so lovely and cool now—I'm sure it's good for us. You go if you like, though "

Ianthe Ambrose, however, made no move Like a fog that had lifted only for a little, misery came down over her face again, shutting her out from the others

"What school do you teach at, Miss Ambrose?" Clare presently asked. There was a silence, and Melissa had to reply.

"My sister was at Summerton till recently. She taught the top form classics. Just now, she's having a long rest before—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Mel, cut out the soothing syrup," her sister shockingly exclaimed. "I had a breakdown and they sacked me."

"I do think it was absolutely iniquitous of them," said Melissa. "After all, it wasn't as if—" Her voice trailed away helplessly, and she gave an ugly little shrug of the shoulders.

"Well, ladies, everything to your liking, I hope? You care for a pillow, Mrs. Blaydon?" Nikki had come up, radiating charm and good will, his broad shoulders blocking out a considerable segment of the night sky.

"Yes, thank you, Mr Nikolaides," said Melissa.

"Ah now, I hope we shall not stand on ceremony Everyone calls me Nikki Say, you are all English, yes? I love particularly the English."

"All of them, Nikki?" Melissa Blaydon's tone was decidedly flirtatious

"Sure thing! All of them. A great people. And the English women are the most beautiful in the world." Nikki made an expansive gesture

"*All* of them?" Clare mischievously echoed.

"Two especially. Now, ladies, do not be offended. We Greeks are a sim-

ple people When we admire, we say so. When we hate—" His teeth flashed at them like a maneater's

"But don't the Greeks hate us over Cyprus?"

"No, no, no, Mr. Strangeways Your government is not popular with us. But we do not confuse people, individuals, with their government. We Greeks are great individualists."

The *Menelaos* came alive. Shouts were heard from the fo'c's'le and the quay. Nikki held up his finger.

"You hear? The engines are started. In a minute or two we are on our way."

"Mel, I'm not feeling good. I want to go below."

"Oh, Ianthe darling, wouldn't you like just to watch us steaming out of harbor? It's always so exciting."

Ianthe's voice, which had been low and urgent, now rose to a kind of muffled shriek.

"I can't stand it when the siren goes!"

"Darling, there's no siren here."

"That thing on the funnel The steam whistle. We're so near it. My nerves won't stand it, I tell you! It'll be going off any minute now! Please, please, pl—"

"All right, dearest Come along, then. Good night, everyone."

Melissa's arm around Ianthe's waist, the two sisters hurried away. Nikki stared after them, then sauntered off along the deck.

"Well!" said Clare. "That poor thing ought to be in a nursing home still. I do hope we're not going to have trouble with her, on the voyage."

"Anyway, she managed to detach Melissa from the magnetic Nikki "

"Oh, Nigel, you don't think—?"

"I think she's going to be a proper ball and chain for Melissa, one way or another."

"I rather like Melissa."

"She's a nitwit. But she seems to have a heart."

The steam whistle gave a long, groaning bellow Passengers, jumping up from their chairs, crowded to the rail The screws began to thrash, and, almost imperceptibly at first, the *Menelaos* edged away from the quayside

FRATERNIZATION

Nigel Strangeways awoke early next morning, roused by the sunlight streaming through the porthole onto the upper bunk, which he occupied. Lowering himself cautiously to the floor, so as not to disturb his cabin companion, Dr. Plunket, he put on bathing trunks, took a towel, and sought the swimming pool on the fo'c's'le.

It had been filled during the night, and sailors were now rigging an awning above it, which extended to shelter several feet of deck on either side of the pool itself. Walking to the bows, Nigel looked about him. Astern, just visible still, lay an island which, if the *Menelaos* had caught up with her schedule, should be Siros, the capital of the Cyclades. The sun, climbing on his left hand, was already giving off enough heat to warm the deck beneath his bare feet On the starboard beam a caique rose and dipped on the waves, and two tawny-colored sea birds, flying low, escorted the *Menelaos,* crisscrossing her bows. Dead ahead, a small low island, rising at one point to a hill, must be Delos, with Mount Kynthos crowning it. A bar of pure turquoise color, some effect of sun and shallows, reached out from the island at a diagonal, contrasting with the royal blue of the sea on this side and the pale green beyond.

The sailors finished putting up the awning and retired, chattering among themselves like grasshoppers. Looking aft from the bows, Nigel saw, over the top of the awning, the windows of the forward lounge, and above them the bridge, on one wing of which stood a ship's officer, and the wheelhouse.

He plunged into the swimming pool The water was deliciously cold. There was only space to swim half a dozen strokes, but it had a good depth —with his toes on the bottom, the water came up to Nigel's chin, and he was six feet tall.

After thrashing around for a while, he was about to get out when Primrose Chalmers appeared. She was still wearing the blouse, the serge skirt, and the sporran—indeed, they looked as if she had slept in them; but these were now topped by a Venetian gondolier's straw hat with a green ribbon dangling down behind.

"Is it deep?" the child asked.

"About five feet, six inches. Can you swim?"

"Yes. But I prefer the sea. Swimming baths are full of bacilli."

Nigel shuddered and got out smartly, sitting down on the low parapet of the pool

"How's the play therapy going?" he asked.

"Play therapy? Isn't that something the psychiatrists make you do?" Primrose uttered the word "psychiatrists" with all the contempt of the Freudian analyst.

"Your note-taking, I mean."

A secretive look came over the child's flabby face, and her hand went unconsciously to the sporran. Glancing slantwise at Nigel, she said, "I'm going to give you an association test I say a word, and you have to say the first word that comes into your head. You must—"

"Yes, I know how it's done."

Primrose drew the notebook from her sporran, opened a page, held her fountain pen poised, and began.

"Summer."

"Fields," responded Nigel.

"Love."

"Hate."

"Beetle."

"Dung."

"British."

"Hypocrisy."

"Salt."

"Lord Dunsany."

"What?" Primrose paused in the task of writing down Nigel's answers "Lord who?"

"Dunsany He was very fastidious about what kind of salt he ate. As far as I remember, rock salt was the only—"

"Oh, all right. Next word—Loin."

"Pork."

"Drown."

"Griefs."

"Ice cream."

"Hot chocolate sauce."

"Makarios"

There was a noticeably longer pause before Nigel replied, "Beard."

Primrose asked him a few more; but only as a formality, or to lull the unmasked EOKA agent, Nigel Strangeways, into a false sense of security That pause after "Makarios" had given him away properly, judging by the veiled look of triumph on young Primrose's face And Nigel had not made it

deliberately; he could kick himself now, for as a result of that involuntary pause the child would be trailing him everywhere—yes, and anyone he talked to, since Bentinck-Jones had told her there were two EOKA agents on board. Damn the man for his fatuous games!

Ten minutes later, Nigel sat down in the saloon for breakfast. It was only five past seven, and the other occupants of the table had not yet arrived. Nigel ordered orange juice and coffee, and started in on the plate of buns before him, buttering them heavily He noticed at other tables Jeremy Street, his head buried in a book, and Primrose Chalmers with a man and a woman—her parents, no doubt—who had the mildly lunatic look not uncommon among psychoanalysts, lay or otherwise

When Clare turned up, she laid before him a copy of the *Journal of Classical Studies* and gave him a warm kiss. Nigel leafed through the magazine till he found what he was looking for. It was a long review of Jeremy Street's last translation—the *Medea:* it took that work to pieces with a chilly, relentless hostility, a derisive contempt, and a wealth of scholarship, which made Nigel positively blush for the unfortunate translator. The review was signed with the initials "I.A." No wonder Jeremy Street had bristled at the very mention of the name "Ambrose," and removed the *Journal* from the reading room. And, if Ianthe Ambrose treated her pupils' efforts in this devastating manner, it was small wonder that Faith Trubody should have blanched to see her coming on board.

There was a sharp rap on the table, and Nigel looked up. Clare had taken a piece of bread from the basket in front of her and nearly broken her teeth on it.

"What *is* this?" she asked, bashing it on the table again. "Pumice stone?"

"It's Greek bread. The Greeks are a tough people. Try a bun instead."

"You've eaten them all."

"So I have Never mind. Just listen to this." In a low voice Nigel read out the last two paragraphs of I.A.'s review:

> From any translator we have the right to demand two minimum qualifications—an intimate knowledge of the language of the original, and a refined feeling for his own. If Mr Street merely showed himself ignorant of modern textual recensions of his author, it would be deplorable enough But when carelessness is added to ignorance, when a translation is defaced by solecisms, wild guesswork, and even by schoolboy howlers, when unjustifiable liberties are taken with the text, then no protest can be sufficiently strong As for Mr. Street's command of his own language, we can only say that it is negligible A version which, mixing stale colloquialisms with the most tawdry trappings of

romanticism, substitutes vulgarity for grandeur, hysteria for tragedy, and has the effect of turning Medea into a suburban delinquent, may titillate the unlettered public but must degrade its original In his preface, Mr Street makes great play with his dislike for the "pedantry" of scholars It is possible, however, that Euripides would prefer the strait jacket of scholarship to the poisonous shirt in which Mr. Street has clothed him

We have had occasion before now to censure Mr Street in these columns. To popularize the classics is one thing, to pervert them is another The standards of translation are low enough today, in all conscience A person of Mr Street's influence, putting out work so shoddy and so slovenly as his *Medea*, is lowering the standards to a nadir hitherto unconceived We can but repeat what Blake said of Sir Joshua Reynolds—"this man is hired to depress art."

"Gracious!" said Clare after an awed silence. "She doesn't seem to like him, does she?"

"She's given chapter and verse for all her criticisms, earlier on."

"Well, if somebody said that about my work, I'd kill her."

II

By eight o'clock that morning the *Menelaos* had anchored off Delos, and caiques were waiting to take the passengers ashore. There was an excited feeling of anticipation in the air: the passengers had loosened up, no longer exchanging formal introductions before they talked to strangers. Only the French contingent, forming as ever a sort of splinter group, waited on the promenade deck in a cluster and maintained an insular detachment. Nigel and Clare, near the head of the gangway, would be among the first to get off.

"Good morning, good morning," cried Mr. Bentinck-Jones, pushing his way up to them. "We're lucky in our weather. It's often too rough to disembark here, you know."

A sailor handed a landing card to each passenger, and soon they were chugging their way in a crowded motor caique to the quay.

"What's this? A reception committee?"

All along the quay figures could be seen, who presently resolved themselves into men, women, and children displaying their wares—bright-colored scarves, nuts, trinkets, rough-woven shirts, and shopping bags. The sun was beating down fiercely on the treeless island, the water beside the quay looked cool and deep green. Nigel noticed the Bishop of Solway pur-

chasing and putting on a shirt of turquoise and white horizontal stripes, which gave him a remarkably piratical appearance.

Having run the gantlet of the island traders, the passengers straggled away from the sea toward the sites of the two cities, Greek and Roman, which covered the ground, almost as far as eye could see, with a litter of masonry. Lizards baked on the stones, skittering away into crannies when a footstep came too near. The parched brown grass rasped against one's shoes, and it was hard to believe that in springtime the island is thick with flowers.

Nikki now jumped up on a marble slab, and made a traffic policeman's gesture. Most of the party gathering around, and the stragglers at last arriving, Nikki announced through his hand megaphone that two brief talks would now be given. The celebrated British savant, Mr. Jeremy Street, would talk about the mythological significance of Delos, and Professor George Greenbaum, of Yale University, would then speak on the archaeological aspects. After this, the party would split up into small groups, which would be conducted over the site by the Greek guides.

The travelers disposed themselves as best they could, wherever a declivity or a broken pillar promised some shade. Jeremy Street, hatless, in royal-blue linen trousers and a pale-blue shirt, stood on the slab waiting for them to settle. He had waved aside the megaphone which Nikki preferred

Whatever might be his defects as a scholar and a translator, it at once became evident that Jeremy Street was an exceptionally good lecturer His voice carried clearly to the outer fringes of the crowd He spoke without notes, without confusing digressions, without a trace of self-consciousness. One could admire his technique, thought Nigel, as one admired the phrasing of a first-rate professional singer, because it was masterly yet did not call attention to itself.

"We are on the Sacred Island," he began, "the legendary birthplace of Apollo and Artemis Legend is an attempt of prescientific man to explain the world to himself, to solicit or appease the mysterious powers of nature What did that many-sided deity, Apollo, represent to those who first, out of their fears, their needs and their aspirations, created him?" . . .

As the charming, resonant voice went on, Nigel glanced around the scattered audience They were clearly spellbound. Only Ianthe Ambrose, sitting huddled up with her back against a mound, struck a discordant note. She was tweaking at a piece of wiry grass beside her, a sour and skeptical look on her face; perhaps it was the result of having just read her blistering article on Street's *Medea*, but Nigel got the impression of something more positive than skepticism—it was jealousy that lay barely concealed behind

her sullen yet attentive expression, or was a remorseless hostility waiting in ambush there? He suddenly dreaded that she was going to make a scene, make some virulent attack upon the lecturer.

But, on this occasion, Ianthe Ambrose held her fire. Jeremy Street ended, was loudly applauded, and gave way to the American professor. During the latter's discourse, Nigel noticed Jeremy Street quietly perch himself on a piece of pavement close to the blond Faith Trubody, who looked up at him with an expression of shy but near-idolatrous admiration. It was noticeable, too, that when the audience split up into smaller groups, Street accompanied Faith and her father toward the Hall of the Bulls. Mr. Bentinck-Jones, who had started in another group, soon moved away from it and tagged onto them, talking assiduously.

"Poor little man, he doesn't like to feel left out of anything," Clare remarked. "Well, I'm going to concentrate on the lions."

Nigel knew from her tone that she wanted to be by herself for a while. So they arranged to meet at midday outside the café adjoining the museum, and struck off on separate paths. Nigel trailed along with the party that included Street and the Trubodys, visiting the Roman quarter, admiring the mosaic floor depicting Dionysus on a tiger, and then making his way up the stony track which led to Apollo's cave on Mount Kynthos. Halfway up, he saw Melissa Blaydon sitting alone on a rock. She signaled to him, and he went over to her.

"I've done an idiotic thing," she said; "broken my shoelace. You haven't got a piece of string?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Well, I must just sit here till help comes," she remarked cheerfully It was odd, he thought, the way this mondaine creature looked as perfectly at home here as a lizard· her brown skin absorbed the fierce sunshine, she radiated vitality, but also a kind of coolness far more provocative than the stock female devices for attracting attention. She is Artemis, he thought, but what she hunts is men. Looking around, he realized that he was quite alone with her on the hillside.

"Perhaps if we picked some of these long wiry grass stems and plaited them, we could make a temporary shoelace?"

"Oh, what a resourceful man!" Melissa's eyes—greenish-brown, with gold flecks in one of them—dwelt lingeringly upon his. "Well, to work"

As he pulled the grass and she plaited it, she explained that her sister had not felt up to climbing the hill.

"I do hope this cruise will do her good."

"Yes I'm rather worried about her. She seemed well over the worst

before we started, and the doctor said it'd be quite all right for her to come. But—" Melissa's deep voice trailed away.

"But she's having a bit of a relapse?"

"I'm afraid so. Last night, after we left you, she got into a dreadful state —well, you know, saying she couldn't stand it any more—her loneliness—nothing worth living for."

"But she has you. You're extraordinarily patient and unselfish with her."

"Me? Unselfish?" Melissa laughed harshly. "My dear man, I'm about as selfish as any woman living. I'd not seen Ianthe for years She and I never really hit it off, from the cradle When I got the cable saying she was seriously ill, I flew from the Bahamas. But that, and bringing her on this cruise—well, I suppose it was just because I felt guilty for having neglected her so long. And for living among the fleshpots while she had to grind away at school."

"She's got a brilliant intelligence, I'd say."

"Oh yes, I suppose so."

"Why did the school sack her? Surely not for having a nervous breakdown."

"I don't know," said Melissa vaguely. "There was some row, I believe. They're a lot of catty old virgins, these schoolmistresses. Ianthe has taught at several schools. I expect they're jealous because she's so much cleverer than they are. And I dare say"—Melissa gave him her lopsided smile—"she let them know it."

"Well, I still think you're very good to her."

"Of course Ianthe's always been mad keen to visit Greece All these ruins and things are wasted on me. I only hope she won't be distracted from them."

"Distracted?"

Melissa turned her head away. "She feels she must play gooseberry to me I'm a year older than Ianthe actually; but she sort of invilig—what's the word?"

"Invigilates?"

"Yes, invigilates me, poor sweet." Melissa gazed at Nigel, her red lips parted "I seem to be unbosoming to you an awful lot. Does everyone?"

"Absolutely everyone."

Melissa laughed "Yet you don't seem a bit nosy—not like that Bentinck-Jones creature. Oh dear, here comes another horde of cultural pilgrims."

They talked a bit longer about Ianthe. Then Melissa, who had finished plaiting the grasses, threaded them through the eyeholes of her shoe. She arched a brown, pretty foot at Nigel, for him to put the shoe on

"You'd better go easy with this. I don't know how long it will hold," said Nigel, gingerly knotting the grass plait.

"Walk down the hill with me, then. And if it breaks, you can support my feeble frame the rest of the way."

Melissa Blaydon evidently took it for granted that any man would alter his plans to suit her; she could hardly have forgotten that Nigel had been walking up the hill when they met. Yes, she's a "spoiled" woman, but this calm assumption that everyone will love to dance attendance on her is somehow quite inoffensive, thought Nigel.

This thought prompted him to say, as they descended the stony track, "I imagine you had a very good relationship with your father."

"Yes, I did. But how—?"

"And your sister didn't?"

Melissa made no reply. A strange look, both rueful and fretful, came over her face, shutting her away from him. Stumbling over a stone, she clutched his arm; the contact sent a sort of instantaneous flash right through his body.

"You're not offended?" he asked.

Still not looking at him, Melissa exclaimed, "Why can't one just be allowed to be happy, if that's one's nature?"

III

Clare, meanwhile, was concentrating on the lions. She had picked her way among the tumbled masonry, past a headless female figure in voluminous draperies, with her right arm, apparently, in a sling, beyond which a tall, four-pillared portico—all that was left of a temple—commanded the skyline. Columns, single or in groups, sprouted all over the site, a petrified forest blinding white in the glare of the sun. Near the Sacred Lake sat the five lions on their plinths. Their flat heads and gaping jaws, eroded by centuries of storm, gave them the appearance of sea lions; but the powerful forepaws on which they were propped, and the crouching strength of the haunches, had an almost naturalistic truth.

Had the man who carved them ever seen a lion? Clare wondered.

They sat there in a row, guardians, confident but alert, waiting—or so it struck Clare—for something to happen. They had waited a long time, in their calm, archaic poses. She singled out one of the lions, and directed all her attention upon it. The slightly curving diagonal line of the back, from

head to tail—could one aim at that sort of simplicity nowadays without falling into a self-conscious primitivism?

As Clare intensely scrutinized the lion, its simple strength seemed to pass into her. She felt refreshed, reinvigorated, and wonderfully sleepy. Moving into the shadow of a wall nearby, she lay down and fell asleep

She was awakened by voices that, through the daze of sleep, sounded unnaturally loud.

". . . don't intend to discuss the matter with you."

"I'm sorry, but you've got to."

"Are you threatening me? How dare you talk to me like this?"

"You know that my sister was very ill after— She had brain fever. If she had died, it would have been your responsibility "

"That of course is ridiculous. I'm sorry to hear about her illness, but—"

"You made a vile accusation against her, and she was expelled. I happen to be very fond of Faith She told me the whole story."

"Your loyalty does you credit. But it doesn't seem to occur to you that Faith might have made up whatever story she told you; we never found her very reliable, I'm afraid, where the truth was concerned." Ianthe Ambrose's voice was firm and cool, but there was a jagged edge to it.

"It wasn't just what you accused her of. You'd been picking on her all that term, though God knows why—she was supposed to be your favorite pupil before that. It's a wonder you didn't drive her to suicide."

"Oh, fiddlesticks! She was a clever girl, certainly. Scholarship standard. But we'd always found her rather unbalanced and rather deceitful She was caught cheating—using test papers she had stolen from my room. On top of that, she was grossly insolent to me before the whole class. Those are the facts."

"I beg your pardon. That is your version of the facts. Faith's version is that you—you framed her."

Peter Trubody's young voice rose higher, and what he went on to say sounded all the more horrible for being uttered in the same clipped, refined, gobbling public-school accent.

"—framed her because you'd—" he plunged at it desperately—"you'd made advances to her and she wasn't having any of that "

There was a moment of absolute silence. Then Clare heard a violent crack. Miss Ambrose had slapped Peter's face.

"You'll regret this," the boy said presently, his voice quite low again, but still with the absurdly pompous senior prefect's intonation. "You see, I'm determined to clear Faith's name."

"Don't talk like a novelette."

"I know you're very clever and all that. But the truth always wins, in the end. No, you're not going yet. I shall take steps to see things put right, and you will not find the process very pleasant. It would be simplest all around if you wrote a confession—"

"This is utterly grotesque!"

"If you don't, you'll find that other people can be just as—as vindictive as you. I'm warning you."

"Let me go at once!"

"Not till— Does your sister know why you were sacked from the school last term? Oh yes, a friend of Faith's wrote to her about it. She said—"

"If you don't let go of me this instant, I'll call for help." Ianthe's voice wobbled on the edge of hysteria.

"I bet you will," said Peter contemptuously. "And accuse me of trying to rape you or something. Another false accusation. You're pretty handy with them, aren't you, Miss Ambrose? Very well, you can go now." The boy spoke like a prefect who has just ticked off a fag. "But I'd advise you to remember what I've said. You're going to pay for what you did to Faith. One way or another."

There was a noise of feet scrabbling on stones. A few sobbing breaths came from Ianthe. Peering around the end of the wall, Clare saw her and Peter Trubody move away in different directions, Ianthe stumbling among the stones. Clare also noticed the figure of Primrose Chalmers emerge from behind the nearest lion: the child was putting her notebook and pen into the sporran; the expression on her face was both complacent and puzzled, as if an entomologist had netted some exquisite but unidentifiable moth.

When she got up from the shadow of the wall, the meridian sun struck down at Clare's head like a hammer. But it was not the sun which made her feel sick.

Nigel was awaiting her outside the café After disposing of an ice-cold orangeade, she felt better. The tables around them were all occupied.

"Let's go into the Museum," said Clare. "There's something I must tell you."

In a cool, empty gallery, among the stone-deaf ears of statues, she still kept her voice low as she told him what she had overheard just now.

"I don't know why it should have upset me so, it was all so unreal and melodramatic. But I felt quite sick. And that monster, Primrose, taking it all down."

"Well, it's one mystery cleared up. We know why Faith took on so when she saw Miss Ambrose coming aboard" Nigel glanced speculatively at Clare. "Which story do you believe?"

"Which story?"

"Ianthe's? Or the Faith-and-Peter version?"

"I don't know," said Clare slowly. "I dare say Ianthe could be vindictive —well, there's that review of Jeremy Street. And I dare say Faith Trubody is rather unbalanced. Nigel, he couldn't really do anything to her?"

"Peter? I shouldn't think so. Might start some sort of persecution campaign, perhaps. Awfully bad form for a public-school type like him." Nigel gave her a longer look this time. "What's on your mind, love?"

"Yes. You're quite right. It's what Ianthe might do to Peter that really worries me—if he did start 'taking steps,' as he called it, I mean. The woman isn't quite sane."

"Well, she's got Melissa looking after her. And there's a ship's doctor "

"Melissa won't be much help once she gets into her stride with the men " Clare peered clairvoyantly into Nigel's face "Ah. She has already?"

"There are circumstances in which the male, however innocent, cannot refrain from looking guilty," Nigel proclaimed. "Yes, I was engaged with Melissa on the hillside while you were dropping eaves I wouldn't say she is in full stride yet, but she's working up to it. She improves on closer acquaintance."

"Oh."

"She thinks I am very resourceful."

"She does, does she?"

"Yes. And she's afraid that her sister may commit suicide."

IV

After dinner that night there was to be a seminar in the forward lounge. The two lecturers who had spoken in the morning would be available to answer questions on the subject of Delos, and passengers were encouraged to contribute to the discussion.

To Nigel, who even as an undergraduate had never been conspicuous for attendance at lectures, this sounded far too much like work. So he and Clare settled down in deck chairs aft, thereby missing another scene of the drama which was gradually unfolding on the *Menelaos*.

They sat in companionable silence, thinking their own thoughts while the ship rolled in a moderate sea raised by the strong wind which so often, Mr Bentinck-Jones had informed them, got up in these parts at nightfall. Clare was still brooding over her lion Nigel fell to speculating about Melissa Blaydon. Pliant, charmingly acquiescent on the surface, she had, he

suspected, a very tough core. Like Ianthe, she could be a ruthless remover of obstacles. Perhaps a more skillful and practiced one, too. But she had her contradictions; just after dinner Nigel had heard her say to Ianthe, "But, darling, it really isn't my thing at all. Why can't you go by yourself?" Ianthe had made some reply, inaudible to him; and then, a few minutes later, he had seen the sisters going into the seminar together. Melissa did seem capable of disinterested affection, of some unselfishness.

He was reminded now of something else she had told him on the hillside. Ianthe had always been an independent character, going her own way; and the sisters had corresponded little, over the years when Melissa was abroad. But, since Ianthe's breakdown, she had become dependent upon her sister. It was not merely that she hated letting Melissa out of her sight for long, she also never tired of asking Melissa about her life abroad, her marriage, her travels.

"Well," Nigel had said, "I suppose she gets a vicarious satisfaction out of it—the stay-at-home sister reveling in the romantic life of—"

"Of the Prodigal Daughter?" Melissa had cut in, with her lopsided smile. "I wonder. You see, Ianthe always despised the sort of life I've lived. She thinks I'm a feather-wit. I can't imagine why she should suddenly be so interested in it."

"Wouldn't that be an effect of her illness, and of losing her job? She feels there's a void that needs filling up; and even more, the need of a close relationship with someone. Isn't she just trying to re-create the bond between herself and you?"

At which, Melissa Blaydon had looked skeptical. . . .

Three-quarters of an hour later, the seminar being over, Clare and Nigel strolled into the A lounge forward, to be met by that particular kind of high-pitched buzzing which is given off by a beehive or a human community when it has been disturbed. Nigel got drinks at the crowded bar, then carried them over to a corner where Mrs. Hale was beckoning.

"My *dear,*" exclaimed the good lady, "what you have missed!"

"The seminar was interesting?" said Clare.

"Interesting! It was a riot." Mrs Hale's eyes opened wide with shocked glee. "Miss Ambrose and Mr Street pretty well had a stand-up fight."

"Oh, come now, my dear," the Bishop of Solway mumbled. "A bit of controversy, let's call it."

"Oh, I dare say it's nothing to the shindies that go on in Convocation But to me it looked like an all-in intellectual wrestling match."

"But what happened?"

"Miss Ambrose got up and asked a question Mr. Street answered it. She whipped in another; and before you could say 'Artemis,' they were at it hammer and tongs—something to do with Linear B. What on earth *is* Linear B? Sounds like trigonometry to me."

"It's a Greek script," said the Bishop. "Blegen found tablets at Pylos inscribed in Linear B, just before the war. Wace found others at Mycenae in 1952—the same year the script was deciphered as being in the Greek language. The discoveries proved Wace's theory that Mycenaean civilization was Greek, and that there was strong Mycenaean influence in the last phase at Knossos. Schliemann, of course—"

"My dear Edwin, do stick to the point," interrupted his wife. "The point is that Miss Ambrose was unforgivably rude to poor Mr. Street. She tried to humiliate him, in public, and—"

"I'm afraid she succeeded," said the Bishop to Nigel, in a grave tone. "She exposed some bad gaps in his knowledge—well, made him look like a badly taught schoolboy, in fact. It really was most unpleasant."

"And quite irrelevant?" asked Nigel.

"Irrelevant to a discussion on Delos, certainly. It looked to me regrettably like a piece of pure mischief on Miss Ambrose's part. I felt there was some personal animosity at work."

"Her sister was terribly embarrassed. Quite furious with Ianthe. In fact, she dragged her out of the seminar before she'd finished—"

"You mean, physically dragged her out?"

"Well, not quite. But Miss Ambrose was shaking all over, and—here comes the other duelist."

Jeremy Street, accompanied by Faith Trubody and her father, entered the lounge There was a moment's silence; then everyone started talking, louder and faster, it seemed, than before. Faith, moving closer to Jeremy, looked around in a challenging way The man's face flushed a little; the lips were tightly compressed. After getting their drinks, he and the Trubodys came across to a vacant group of chairs next to the Bishop's party.

"Well!" Mrs Hale said without preamble. "I should think you need a drink after that. What a battle!"

Nigel gave her full marks for the genuine and unexpected tact she was showing by this open reference to the scene.

Jeremy Street gave a tight smile, which did not relax his face. "She's rather a pest, I'm afraid."

"It was absolutely typical of the Bross," put in Faith Trubody. "There's nothing she likes so much as showing up—" She broke off, flushing scarlet, and looking miserable at the gaffe. "Of course, I don't mean you—I mean,

she's naturally a bloody-minded old schoolmarm and—" The girl floundered again. Jeremy Street made no attempt to help her out, Nigel noticed. Bad mark to him.

"My daughter was taught for a while by Miss Ambrose," said Mr. Trubody, a pleasant-faced man with gray hair and a manner of easy authority.

"And I was taught by Miss Ambrose's father—oh, some thirty years ago," said Jeremy Street. "He was my tutor at Cambridge. A very able man. She gets her talent from him. And"—Street made one of those delicate yet commanding gestures which had graced his lecture at Delos—"and her rather cantankerous disposition."

Jeremy Street's smile was calm, almost Olympian. He spoke without any trace of resentment. Is he quite invulnerable in his self-esteem, wondered Nigel, or is he putting on an act? Jeremy was, at any rate, one of those men whose public *persona* encases them so completely that the private self is invisible. What would one find underneath if the carapace were removed?

Nigel studied Faith Trubody, who in her turn was gazing raptly at Street as he talked, her mouth half open. The small, irregular teeth gave her a sly, vixenish look in profile. She was prettier than Nigel had thought, though; still quite unsure of herself, temperamentally erratic, he judged, and working up a full-blown crush on the handsome Jeremy Street. Or was it a crush? Did she perhaps hope to enlist him in her brother's campaign against Ianthe Ambrose? And then, of course, there was the problem of Faith's expulsion from school. Peter Trubody, in Clare's hearing, had given one account of this, Miss Ambrose another; Nigel was by no means disposed to accept the former without question. Faith too, he thought, was quite capable of making false charges.

On an impulse, he asked the girl if she knew why Miss Ambrose had had to leave Summerton. Faith seemed rather taken aback, but replied

"Well, I don't know—I mean, she had a nervous breakdown last term, but a friend of mine who's still there told me it was because the Bross was a failure as a teacher."

"But she's a first-rate scholar, I thought."

"Oh yes, but she can't sort of put it over. We weren't getting the university scholarships we should have been." Faith's green eyes flickered at Nigel "And she wasn't popular, you know She, well, had favorites, and ignored everyone else And of course she was terribly sarcastic."

"Were you a favorite of hers?" Nigel asked, smiling

"She got me sacked from the place."

It was no answer, but Nigel did not press the question Their conversa-

tion had been conducted in low tones, while Jeremy Street and the Bishop talked about Cambridge. The pair made an interesting contrast: the Bishop, with his neat, vandyke beard, his rumpled gray alpaca suit, his Viking-blue eyes; Jeremy Street, dressed dandyishly, talking with the conscious stylishness of a belletrist, smoothing the golden hair which curled up at the nape of his neck. A rumbling bass voice, a resonant tenor.

Faith Trubody was gazing at Street now with open adulation What most disquieted Nigel was that the man appeared to be unembarrassed by it—to accept it as his natural and rightful due. It might have been better for him, if not for Faith, that he should be a straightforward womanizer. But Jeremy Street was cold, Nigel feared—as cold as Narcissus.

Soon after ten o'clock, Clare feeling sleepy, she and Nigel took a turn around the deck before going to their cabins. The promenade deck was lined with deck chairs, nearly all of them occupied. As they passed, a woman's voice called·

"Oh, Miss Massinger, have you seen my sister anywhere?"

"No, Mrs. Blaydon. She's not in the big lounge, anyway." Clare moved closer to the figure huddled in the deck chair. "Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Ambrose. I mistook you for your sister. Shall I tell her you want her, if I see her?"

"Thank you."

In the stern of the *Menelaos*, very close together at the rail, Nigel presently noticed two figures. The broad back and black oiled hair of Nikki were unmistakable. The woman so close at his side was Melissa Blaydon.

"What do we do about it?" Clare whispered.

"Better tell her."

"Mrs Blaydon. Your sister was asking for you. She's back there on the promenade deck."

Melissa swung around. Her eyes gradually focused, as if she were coming out of an anesthetic Her nostrils were distended.

"What? Oh, thank you. I'd better go, Nikki."

She gave the man a quick, deep glance, then hurried away.

Nikki gazed after her with frank admiration. "What a woman!" he then exclaimed, shining his teeth at Nigel and Clare "It is sad that she has—what does your poet call it?—an albatross around her neck."

V

The next morning, they landed on Patmos Led by Nikki, the main party straggled from the quay, past groups of children holding up flowers, to a tree-lined square on the island side of the little port. Here the donkeys were congregated which would convey them up to the monastery of St. John the Divine.

Here, Ivor Bentinck-Jones was in his element. He helped the women onto their mounts, fussed over the harness, and encouraged the departing riders with cries of "Up and at 'em!" "Canyons to left of them, canyons to right of them!" "She'll be coming up the mountain when she comes!" and other appropriate slogans of the day.

Nigel, who had seen Clare and Mrs. Hale jog off, found himself at the end of the cavalcade. He eyed his own animal with considerable misgiving It seemed several sizes too small for him, and it had a distrait yet purposeful look in its rolling eye which reminded him of the wrong kind of society hostess. On mounting, he found his misgivings only too well justified. The stirrups were so short that he could only keep his feet in them by bending his legs backward, so that he was trussed like a chicken, while two pieces of metal, projecting from the ancient saddle, drove viciously into his thighs if he attempted to grip with them. For reins, the animal had a single rope, so that, in order to change direction, Nigel must lean forward and pass the rope over the brute's muzzle to the other side of its head.

As well as these handicaps, Nigel discovered, when the ass's owner gave his bloodcurdling cry and thumped the animal on its hind quarters, that it had a bias like a bowl; or else an inveterate feud with Bentinck-Jones's donkey. As they went side by side up the stony track, Nigel's ass kept boring into his companion's, as if determined to force it over the edge.

Bentinck-Jones, however, was unruffled. "Sure-footed animals. Just leave them to find their own way," he brightly remarked as his own beast, driven by Nigel's into the shallow ditch at the side of the track, stumbled over a heap of stones. And a minute later, his pudgy face pink and sweating, "I say, Strangeways, what about Miss Ambrose, eh?"

"Well, what about her!"

"Obstinate. Nikki and her sister both tried to persuade her not to come up to the monastery. Rough journey. Very exposed to the sun. But no, she would do it."

"She's paid to see the monastery, so—"

"Mrs. Blaydon's paid, you mean. She's footing the bill, you know. Quite inseparable, aren't they?"

"Who?" asked Nigel, holding onto the saddle for dear life as the asses suddenly decided to gallop.

"Ah-ha! Who indeed?" panted Mr. Bentinck-Jones, giving him a disagreeable wink. Clashing together in mid-track, the asses slowed again to a walk. Their owner howled at them, and they broke into a bone-jolting jog trot.

"Handsome fellow, Nikki. Virile, eh?" said Ivor Bentinck-Jones. "Quite the lady-killer. Rather a bad show, though, don't you think?"

"What's a bad show?" Nigel was deliberately obtuse.

"Well, he's in an official position Cruise manager Looks bad. Do you think he's made her yet?"

Appalled by this sudden vulgarity, Nigel said nothing. Ivor seemed undeterred, however. Beaming benignly, he cooed, "Ah well, these shipboard romances. Ships that pass in the night. But of course they're not the only unmarried couple on board."

Conscious of the man's sharp, sideways glance, Nigel pretended confusion. "What do you mean by that?" he asked jerkily.

"Well, there's young Miss Trubody and our distinguished lecturer, Jeremy Street."

Nigel feigned indignation, and relief. "Oh, come! He's old enough to be her—"

"It's a case," Ivor jovially proclaimed. "That girl's just ripe to fall off the bough, mark my words. But that sort of thing is dangerous for a man in a public position Or," he added, "a woman."

"But Miss Trubody isn't a public figure."

"I wasn't thinking of la Trubody, old man," said Bentinck-Jones in his coziest way.

A pandemonium of cries and clattering hoofs broke out from above, where the track zigzagged down the hillside from the fortress-like monastery and the ruff of white houses around its base, now only a quarter of a mile away The donkey men, having deposited their first customers, were racing the animals down the hill to pick up more The track was narrow, and it was impossible to get off it on either side at this point.

The avalanche of asses poured down, bringing with them a cloud of dust and a torrent of stones, cannoning onto Nigel and his companion as they pressed to the side of the track. Stimulated by the general excitement, Nigel's ass suddenly swerved against its old enemy, and Bentinck-Jones was thrown off and went rolling down the slope This, fortunately, was not steep

here. A rock arrested his descent and, clambering up onto the track, he remounted. He wore on his face the pertinaciously cheerful expression of the butt of the party determined to show that he takes horseplay in good part.

As they moved on again, Nigel said to him mildly, "Pride, it seems, is not the only thing that goes before a fall."

"What's that? Don't get you, old man." Ivor's eyes had lost their habitual twinkle.

"Never mind. Sorry about the bumping and boring. I simply can't steer this animal with one rope."

"Oh, that's all right, Strangeways. I shan't need to sue for compensation, I hope." There was the faintest stress on the word "sue." "I always prefer friendly arrangements, don't you?"

"Fall heavily, but let off lightly? That sort of thing?"

"Could be. It all depends."

"It's nice to find you unbowed, though bloody Depends on what?"

"On how much there is, shall we say, to lose." Bentinck-Jones pointed to a group standing at the foot of the steps leading up through the village. "Ah, there's Miss Massinger. Charming woman. Great talent. Genius. I hear there's talk of her being commissioned to do a portrait bust of royalty. Damn good show!"

"And there's the Chalmers child," said Nigel, his pale blue eyes fastened non-committally on Ivor Bentinck-Jones's small gray ones "She reminds me of Wordsworth."

"Wordsworth? Good Lord!"

"You remember the lines?—'A Primrose by the river's brim A simple sucker was to him.' "

For once, Mr. Bentinck-Jones appeared to find himself at a loss for words; and when they had dismounted, he moved away, looking thoughtful. Primrose Chalmers glanced at his retreating back, her face dead-pan under the Venetian gondolier's hat.

In the courtyard of the monastery, the Bishop spoke for twenty minutes on the Orthodox Church. The Greek guides then took parties to view the dark and opulent chapel, the library with its 735 Byzantine MSS., and other features of the establishment. Nigel noticed that he and Clare were being shadowed everywhere by Primrose No doubt the child was expecting him to hold some sinister communication with one of the monks; there were many of them—handsome, bronzed men, who smiled engagingly at their visitors, and with their beards, tall hats, and cassocks might have been doubles of Bishop Makarios. Primrose, judged Nigel, was a good deal more

harmless following him around than spying on some of his fellow-travelers. Still, the child was a nuisance; and when they had emerged onto the monastery roof, to look at the incredible panorama of sea and islands spread out below them, Nigel moved over to her.

"How's the Elephant's Child today?" he asked.

"Do you mean me?"

"Yes. The Elephant's Child was possessed of insatiable curiosity."

"Oh?"

The Just-So Stories were evidently not required reading in the Chalmers household; undesirable to encourage animal fetishism.

"You know, I really am *not* an EOKA agent in disguise," Nigel said, seriously and kindly.

Primrose stared at him with a stony expression. Then a sly look came over her face.

"Oh, that!" she said contemptuously. "Do you think I really believe such rot?"

"You did at first, didn't you?"

"All that spy stuff is just compensatory fantasy building. I soon saw through it."

"Let's hope it's nothing worse."

Primrose looked sly and secretive again Nigel took a shot in the dark.

"And now you've got better fish to fry?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Curiosity," said Nigel, "can be an admirable thing. It can also be dangerous. It killed the cat."

"What cat?"

Nigel gave it up. The fat child just stood there, gazing at him through her thick spectacles, answering him in her flat, pedantic voice, like a Dictaphone playing back a conversation. It seemed impossible to make any human contact with her.

Later, Nigel was sorry that he had not persevered.

VI

A little before midday, the party went down the mountain to look at the cave where St John, in exile, is believed to have written the Book of Revelation. The cave was very dark; and not till their eyes were accustomed to the darkness did they perceive that it had been made into a church. The low

ceiling, the uneven floor, the gleam of an ikon, the voices subdued to whispers—one felt at the center of a mystery here.

The Bishop of Solway gave a short address, read a passage from the Book of Revelation, his deep voice rumbling through the gloom like a river rolling boulders, then asked them to join with him in a prayer. He had barely begun the prayer when a woman's voice broke out into a wild, muttering gabble, which sounded unnaturally loud in the hollow place.

"Take me out, Mel! I can't stand it! The dark, it's so dark. Make him stop! Let me out—it's like being buried alive!"

There was a shocked hush; then a scuffling sound as Mrs Blaydon took her sister out of the cave. The Bishop, who had paused, began his prayer again, the strong voice, the noble words came like a purification, the *amen* they all uttered was very far from perfunctory.

When they came out of the cave-church, Nigel asked the Bishop to walk down to the port with him.

"I'm worried about Miss Ambrose," he said, as they started off.

"Should you not leave her case to Dr. Plunket?" the Bishop replied a little formidably; then smiled. "Or to the Church?"

"I think she's in need of both But there are other aspects." Nigel hesitated. Then, drawing a certain document from his wallet, he handed it to the Bishop. "This is confidential, of course."

"What's this? . . . Oh, from the Assistant Commissioner C. . . Well, I'd never have thought you moved in that world. But, my dear fellow, surely Miss Ambrose is not a criminal?"

"Not to my knowledge But I'm afraid of worse unpleasantness breaking out on this cruise, unless— Look here, sir, I'd be very grateful if you would tell me what you know about Miss Ambrose and her sister, when they were children. You said, at dinner the other night, it was a sad story."

The Bishop of Solway gave Nigel a piercing scrutiny from beneath his bushy eyebrows What he saw seemed to satisfy him

"Very well, if you think it might help. E. K. Ambrose and I were Fellows of St Teresa's for some years, before I took up parochial work He was married—didn't live in College; but I saw quite a lot of his family. Melissa must have been—oh, about seven when I first met her; Ianthe was a year younger. The mother died giving birth to Ianthe"

"Ah."

"Yes It explains a good deal. E K. could never prevent himself feeling resentment against Ianthe—and, I'm afraid, showing it. Mind you, he tried to be fair, but there was a coldness in his attitude toward her, she was a

sensitive child, and she must have noticed the efforts he made to be fair. I'm sure she felt shut out."

"Whereas Melissa was the reigning favorite?"

"Yes. She was an artful puss—could twist old E.K. around her little finger."

"And much more attractive to look at, I suppose."

"Oh, I don't know. They were both pretty children. Very much alike then, in fact. But Melissa had those coaxing ways And Ianthe had killed the mother. So there it was."

"Ianthe tried to level the balance by appealing to the scholar in her father," suggested Nigel.

"You're very perceptive. Yes. It was rather pathetic, you know. She was always much cleverer than her sister She learned to read quicker, and so on. She used to come and lay her little intellectual triumphs at E.K.'s feet. And he couldn't really accept them—he had to *pretend* interest and enthusiasm, and she'd see through it. She tried so many ways of getting at his heart."

"Stealing, no doubt?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that was one of them. The phase didn't last long Clowning was another. She was an extraordinarily good mimic, and she used to imitate dons who came to the house, to make E.K. laugh. That did win him, but only while the performance lasted. Yes, she was a bright little thing, but strained, anxious, even in those days; trying too hard you know—permanent frown on her forehead. I say, I'm babbling on rather, aren't I?"

"Not a bit. Did she try becoming a boy?"

"What? Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, that came later, I seem to remember She started playing games a lot Riding. Tennis. Caddying for her father That sort of thing. And of course she'd begun Latin and Greek very young. But it didn't work. It's sad, when a child wants love as desperately as that, and—"

"How about Melissa? Did she and Ianthe hit it off?"

The Bishop hesitated. "It's so long ago. I don't remember them quarreling But I doubt if they were ever close. They hadn't much in common, after all. And everything was so easy for Melissa—except, of course, the intellectual life, and she had no need of that."

"So she got thoroughly spoiled?"

"Well, it isn't good for anyone to have things coming too easily. I'm all for a few frustrations in childhood. And later. Doesn't do to feel yourself the center of the universe. Which is what she was, for E K. Apart from his studies, I mean—they took first place."

The two fell silent for a minute, negotiating a rough section of the track.

Then Nigel said meditatively, "And now Melissa is a rich widow, and Ianthe a failed schoolmistress. Nothing succeeds like success."

From under the beetling gray eyebrows, the Bishop gave him another keen look.

"I don't understand what you expect to do with all this past history."

"Ah, if it were *past* history—" Nigel broke off. "I don't even know, myself. I'm inquisitive about people, and I tend to get involved with them," he went on slowly. "I've spent a lot of my life dabbling in criminology. I've helped to hang quite a few murderers. But I've never yet prevented a crime."

"But what crime do you imagine you might prevent here?"

"If I knew *that*—I just feel there's too much explosive material lying about on the *Menelaos*."

"Can I do anything?" asked the Bishop in his forthright way.

"You can pray," said Nigel seriously. "In particular, for Ianthe Ambrose."

VII

The bathing place was already crowded when Nigel and Clare, after a leisurely lunch under trees outside a little restaurant, arrived there. Some of the passengers were still exploring Patmos; a few had returned to the ship, but most of them, having collected their bathing clothes and picnic lunches from the quay, had made their way to the beach some time ago.

Nigel had a theory that, since the digestive processes do not start work till forty minutes after a meal, it was perfectly in order to bathe during this period. The water was deliciously warm, with so much salt in it that one was buoyed up and cushioned on the silky surface. He swam out fifty yards, then turning over lay on the sea, his eyes closed against the glare of the sun, his mind a blank. Nikki drove past him at a powerful crawl, his black head sleek as a seal's. The shouts and laughter of the bathers seemed to come, muted, through a haze of distance. Like a voice heard in a trance, a line from *Lucrece* irrationally repeated itself in Nigel's brain—*'Tis double death to drown in ken of shore.* Vaguely disturbed, he swam back to dry land.

Where he got out, Ianthe Ambrose was sitting, huddled up with her back against a rock.

"Not going in?" he asked pleasantly.

"I can't swim."

"It's quite shallow for a bit, you know."

"And I'm afraid of the sea urchins."

Nikki had warned the passengers, before their first bathe at Delos, to watch out for these unpleasant creatures, which leave their spines broken off in one's flesh, like splinters of glass, if one treads on them.

"Oh, I don't think there'd be any here," said Nigel. "You only get them on rocks, and you can see them through the water—black patches on white rocks."

Miss Ambrose shuddered, though she did not seem to have paid much attention Her eyes, screwed up against the sunlight, were fixed on some point beyond him. Nigel followed her seaward gaze, and saw Melissa Blaydon, in her distinctive saffron-yellow bathing helmet, throwing a beach ball to Peter Trubody. He threw it back. The ball went wide, and Melissa swam a dozen swift effortless strokes to retrieve it.

"Your sister swims well."

"She has all the social graces," Ianthe tartly replied.

"Is that her Aqua-Lung?" asked Nigel, pointing to an object lying near at hand.

"No I believe it belongs to that boy—what's his name?"

"Peter Trubody?"

"Yes."

Ianthe Ambrose seemed as difficult to make contact with as Primrose Chalmers, who sat a few paces away with her parents, reading a book, her stomach bulging in a tight blue swimming suit. Primrose, he thought, will grow up to be another Ianthe, if she isn't careful. There was something physically repugnant to him, alike in the precocious child and the unbalanced woman: their pasty faces, pebbly eyes, ungainly bodies. Why must Ianthe sit sweating in a woolen jumper and tweed skirt, martyring herself and making this everlasting tacit demand on her sister?

Ashamed of his physical reaction, Nigel tried again.

"The Bishop spoke well at the monastery, didn't he?"

"Oh, *he* knows his stuff," Ianthe ungraciously replied. Then her fingers began to writhe on her lap "I'm told I made an exhibition of myself in that cave afterward."

"It's a pretty claustrophobic place," said Nigel gently.

"Huh! But nobody else started kicking and screaming there. No. It had to be me," she added dismally.

"Well, you've been ill, you can't expect to—"

"I know what you're really thinking," she burst out. "You're thinking that I exploit my illness. Just a hysterical, exacting female. Everybody thinks so. Melissa. Everybody."

"Oh, no, no." Nigel was dismayed The woman was as prickly as a sea urchin. She disregarded his protest.

"But they'll feel differently when I'm gone"—the woman was muttering to herself now; oblivious of Nigel—"that'll teach them a lesson, all these womanizers and bores and rich harlots—"

"So you're thinking of suicide?" Nigel's voice was so frigidly dispassionate that it had the effect of a douche of cold water on Ianthe. She stopped ranting and stared at him in amazement.

"Well! I must say!"

Giving her no pause to recover, talking in the same emotionless tone, Nigel said, "How do you propose to do it?"

"Do be quiet! People can hear you."

"No one's listening. Are you going to kill yourself, or provoke someone else into doing it for you?"

"I—this is fantastic. You must be mad."

"There's young Peter. And Jeremy Street. Both itching for your blood. Have you made any other enemies recently? Or are you your own worst enemy?"

What effect this shock treatment might have had on Ianthe, he was unable to judge, for Melissa and Peter Trubody came walking out of the sea toward them. Peter was gazing at Melissa like a dog at its mistress. When he noticed Ianthe, he gave a curt nod, picked up his Aqua-Lung, and moved away.

"Hello, hello!" said Melissa gaily. "Well, I've done my bit by the Youth Club. Now I can relax."

She was wearing only a bikini. She could afford to Her brown skin was flawless, unwrinkled still. The broad hips and the opulent slope of the haunches contrasted with her rather narrow shoulders, but such was her grace of movement, as she walked up the beach, that she gave the impression of perfect symmetry.

"Do put this on, Mel," said Ianthe, throwing her sister a beach robe. "That get-up may be all very well on the Riviera, but the Greeks don't like it."

"How do you know what the Greeks don't like?" Melissa goodhumoredly replied. Ianthe turned her head sharply away. She thinks Melissa is referring to Nikki, Nigel reflected; oh dear, oh dear.

Melissa had taken her lipstick and mirror out of a wicker basket, rectangular-shaped like an attaché case, and was touching up her full lips Everything was so normal. Nigel could hardly believe that his recent conversation with Ianthe had taken place.

"Have you been using my scissors, darling?" asked Melissa, rummaging in the basket.

"What? To open my veins with? Of course not."

"Don't be silly. Oh, here they are" She turned to Nigel, holding up a bunch she had taken from the basket. "Have some grapes?" The robe falling open, her body seemed to be preening itself at him: her mouth quivered at the corners, her eyes held him so that it felt like a strenuous physical effort to drag his own away For a few seconds this pose of shameless, almost aggressive, invitation was sustained; then Melissa withdrew, as it were, behind her own frontiers.

She just can't help it, said Nigel to himself as he walked away presently, eating the last few grapes; maybe she's hardly conscious of what she's doing. Lilith, the temptress. A dangerous, primeval force.

Clare was sitting in a group of people—Faith Trubody and her father, Jeremy Street, and the ubiquitous Bentinck-Jones—higher up the beach. Faith was not so prepossessing in bathing costume, which revealed the thinness of her arms and legs, the bony knobs of the collarbones, and the rounded shoulders. But her freckled face, as she chattered to Jeremy, had the charm of ingenuousness and animation.

"Have you seen Peter?" asked Mr. Trubody, as Nigel joined the party.

"He's gone off somewhere with his Aqua-Lung."

"He said he wanted to try it off those rocks; there's deep water," Faith told them.

"I do hope he'll watch out for the sea urchins. He's such a reckless boy."

"Oh, don't be absurd, Daddy!" Faith turned again toward Street, whose bronzed, oiled body was stretched full length beside her. "Are you *never* going in, Jeremy?"

"I prefer Apollo to Poseidon," said the distinguished lecturer lightly.

"The water's absolutely dreamy And I bet you're a super swimmer."

Jeremy Street's smile was almost a smirk. He seemed able to lap up any amount of this schoolgirlish flattery Nigel suspected that Street's preference for Apollo might be due to his deficiency as a swimmer, and his vanity would not allow him to betray even this in public

"Well, I'm going in again," announced Bentinck-Jones. "You coming, Miss Trubody?"

"No. Not yet."

Ivor was an absurd spectacle, scampering down to the water on his short legs. But, once in the sea, he showed himself extremely proficient.

"Silly little man," said Faith pettishly. "Why does he hang around all the time?"

"He's an emotional parasite." Jeremy Street's tone, like a thin, immature claret, set Nigel's teeth on edge "No life of his own, presumably So he has to attach himself to others. Hence all this spurious vitality."

"What does the fellow do for a living?" Mr. Trubody asked.

"I gathered from him, on the train to Venice—he attached himself to me for some reason—that he had some sort of export business. He's not tried to sell me anything yet, however—except, of course, himself."

"Or to sell you *back* anything?" murmured Nigel

Jeremy's eyes were concealed by sunglasses. "Sell me *back?* I don't follow you. But the procedures of the business world are all Greek to me—except that I know Greek."

"Ah. Christopher Fry," Mr. Trubody put in. "We businessmen are not all Philistines, you know, Street."

"No indeed," returned Jeremy, with a negligent, graceful wave of the hand. "I find that the most enlightened patronage of the arts comes from big industrial concerns nowadays. But there is plenty of room for extension." Street's voice itself had a note of patronage which Nigel found insufferable.

They were still discussing the subject when Faith cried out, "What's the matter, Peter?"

The boy was walking toward them along the beach, his face dead white and grim.

"Just somebody tried to drown me," he said, throwing the Aqua-Lung at his father's feet.

"Drown you? What do you mean?" Faith exclaimed

"I did a deep dive, and found the Aqua-Lung wasn't working Look. See the hole in the tube here?"

"It must have got damaged—"

"Damaged my foot! I know for a fact it was all right when I used it an hour ago. Somebody's bored a hole in it. Damn near suffocated me before I got to the surface again."

"May I see it?" asked Nigel.

"Here you are. And I know who did it, what's more When I went in with Mrs. Blaydon, I left it—"

"Just a minute, Peter," interrupted Nigel, with such authority in his voice that the boy stopped short. "I'd like a word with you."

He took Peter aside to an empty part of the beach.

"Before you go and start another row with Miss Ambrose, remember that she is in precarious health, mentally, and also that you've no proof—the Aqua-Lung was lying about for some time where anyone could get at it"

"I have no intention of starting a row with Miss Ambrose, certainly not in front of Mel—her sister," said Peter with the stiff pompousness of his age. "I merely want to ask her a simple question· did you or didn't you tamper with this equipment?"

"And if she says no?"

"Well, I—I—"

"Exactly. You can't do anything more about it, my dear chap."

"But it's absolutely outrageous," spluttered the boy, in the exact tone he would be using thirty years later in his club to inveigh against the enormities of the budget. "The woman must be off her head."

"Could you make this hole with the point of a pair of nail scissors?"

"I should think so. If you persevered. The rubber's quite thick. Why?"

"In that case, it's possible that Miss Ambrose did do it."

"Well then!"

Nigel gazed non-committally at the smoldering eyes in the white face. A lock of wet hair flopped over the boy's brow. "You don't seem to ask yourself the obvious question."

"The obvious question?"

"Yes. *Why* should she do it?"

Peter Trubody avoided his eye. "Because she's mad, of course."

"Not to get in her blow first, so to speak?"

"What on earth—?"

"Well, you threatened her. You told her you were 'going to take steps' and 'other people could be vindictive too.' "

"Look here," the youth blustered. "Who the devil are you? Do you spend your time listening in to private conversations?"

"Oh, come off it! I've no tolerance for righteous—or unrighteous—indignation. You made nasty threats to a sick woman—no, never mind what she's done, or you believe she's done, in the past. If you must carry on a blood feud, don't start moaning when your opponent takes a poke at you."

"I wasn't moaning, blast you. I absolutely fail to see—"

"There's a great deal you absolutely fail to see, old son. for example, that Ianthe Ambrose is not the kind of woman who can be bulldozed into giving you what you want to get from her."

"I suppose I ought to appeal to her better nature?" the youth sneered. "She hasn't got one. Ask Faith. If you knew as much—"

"I know that you're playing with dynamite," said Nigel gravely

"An absolutely foul—a great wrong was done to my sister. I'm going to see that it's righted."

Oh lord! thought Nigel, he's just like one of those windy politicians proclaiming, "We shall not sheathe the sword until . . ."

"You're sure you're not confusing justice with revenge?" he quietly asked.

For a moment Peter Trubody looked indecisive; then, his face set and stubborn again, he walked off without another word.

ANNIHILATION

A number of passengers were up on the sun deck below the bridge when, at nine o'clock next morning, the *Menelaos* steamed in toward Kalymnos. This island, some guidebooks claim, is the most beautiful of the Dodecanese. The harbor lies in a broad, deep bay, above which tiers of houses climb the hillsides Clare Massinger's eyes were fastened upon the part of the town which rose up over the port bow. The distance, the sunlight, and the steepness of the hill produced a forshortening effect—a lack of perspective which made the whole thing less like a town than the picture of a town: a picture by Ghika. The houses lay on the background in cubes of brilliant color, white, sky blue, Rickett's blue, and the purity of these blues and whites gave the scene a primitive innocence which Clare found enchanting.

" 'Where every prospect pleaseth and only man is vile,' " announced the fat voice of Ivor Bentinck-Jones at her side.

"Oh, good morning," said Clare. "Yes, it's very strange and suitable. But do you think man is vile, or viler here than anywhere else?"

"Just a manner of speaking, dear lady."

Clare had no tolerance for the "dear lady" stuff.

"I wish poets would think before they speak," she said, a little irritably. Then, seeing Ivor's crestfallen expression, she relented. "Do you suppose it's town planning? I can't imagine the Greeks allowing themselves to be town-planned."

"I don't quite—"

"Those houses. All painted white or blue."

"Oh, that was started during the Italian occupation. They painted the town in the Greek colors as a protest, and they've kept it so ever since."

"Good for them If they'd been Communists, they'd have painted the town red, I suppose."

Ivor gave a sycophantic chuckle. "Are you going to grace the ball tonight?" he presently asked.

"I expect I shall come to the dance."

"Then perhaps I may have the honor of—"

"Ah, that depends on Mr Strangeways," said Clare, in a gush of mad irresponsibility. "He's appallingly *jealous*, you know."

Mr. Bentinck-Jones's face took on an attentive, inward look.

"Oh yes," Clare babbled on, "a man made a pass at me once during a dance, and Nigel didn't like it, and the man had to be taken to the hospital —twelve stitches in his face and two broken ribs. Of course, it was hushed up; the man happened to be connected with royalty."

"With royalty? Indeed?" Ivor had been regarding Clare suspiciously during this rigmarole. He soon moved away—presumably to swallow and digest her story, if he could.

Clare noticed Melissa Blaydon and Nikki leaning over the rail together: Ianthe Ambrose was in a deck chair not far off. Nikki appeared to be pointing out some spot on the coastline away to the left of the harbor; his fingers moved as if tracing a route to it from the town. What caught Clare's idle attention was a certain restraint in Nikki's gestures, an air of secrecy in the way he glanced around from time to time as if to make sure he was not overheard. But, if the pair were planning an assignation, they would hardly do it with Ianthe in earshot.

Yet today might well be their first opportunity. There were no important cultural objectives on Kalymnos; so, until the lecture tonight, and the dance that was scheduled to follow it, Nikki would have few official duties.

The *Menelaos* dropped anchor. Her steam whistle bellowed and a lazy echo came back from the hills. Ianthe Ambrose jerked convulsively at the noise, then buried her ears in her hands. A few minutes later, craft put out from the harbor to take off the passengers.

Nigel and Mrs. Hale joined Clare on the sun deck, watching the primitive-looking craft approach. Nikki came up and greeted them.

"What do we do here?" asked Mrs. Hale.

"You must buy a sponge, madam," Nikki replied. "I will personally select one for you. There's no need to pay more than—"

"But I can't spend all day buying a sponge."

"The island of Kalymnos makes its chief industry sponge-fishing," continued the cruise manager. "No less than three thousand of its male inhabitants pursue the avocation. They are absent all the summer diving for sponges on the coast of North Africa. Then"—a dazzling smile lit up his face—"after a few years, they kick the bucket Lung disease. You know? Very sad."

"Well, when I have bought my sponge?"

"There is transportation waiting to take you to the bathing beaches Mighty fine bathing here. Or you can explore the island on foot The inhabitants are friendly You know? They like to see tourists" Nikki beamed again, and his American accent became more pronounced. "Yeah, in a dead-alive hole like this they sure do like to have visitors come along"

"Good for trade, eh?" said Nigel.

"Yup. And human interest. Oh boy!" Nikki replied with a rollicking laugh. "Well, I'll be seeing you."

"I should think there's a good deal of human interest available among the female population, with three thousand males absent all the summer," Mrs Hale dryly remarked.

Nikki, reflected Clare, seems to be in a state of even greater euphoria than usual; it really does look as if he'd made an assignation with Melissa But how do they propose to get rid of Ianthe?

II

"Why do we have to have these absurd landing cards? I know I shall lose mine one day," exclaimed Mrs. Blaydon.

"Red tape. Pure red tape," Mr. Bentinck-Jones snorted

The flat, pedantic voice of Primrose Chalmers was heard. "Landing cards are a convenience," she announced. "If we didn't have them, it would be necessary to show our passports every time we went ashore."

"Why does this wretched child keep following us about?" muttered Ianthe, all too audibly.

"I'm not following you. I'm standing in the queue behind you. Landing cards are also useful so that the purser can check up whether all the passengers who disembarked returned to the ship. I should have thought that was obvious."

"Don't be insolent, little girl!" Ianthe snapped.

"I was just stating the facts."

"I'm sure my daughter had no intention of offending you," said Primrose's mother in a soothing voice. Ianthe was far from being soothed

"When I want to be lectured to by schoolgirls, I will ask for it," she said, her face twitching.

The Chalmers parents remained impassive This sort of resistance was a commonplace to lay analysts; one felt that a steam roller could pass over them without crushing them. Primrose, however, was less impervious to neurotic outbursts, she gave Ianthe's back an extremely baleful look, and seemed about to renew the controversy.

At this point, however, the queue began to move toward the gangway Melissa, holding her wicker case in one hand, helped her sister down the steep incline.

Nigel Strangeways, meanwhile, had been taken aside by Mr. Trubody,

and brought to a quiet corner of the lounge. The father of Faith and Peter was a distinguished-looking elderly man with a white mustache and the brisk, authoritative manner of the business tycoon.

"You're not going ashore at once?" It was less a question than a statement, though courteously delivered.

"No. We've got all day here."

"I wanted to have a word with you about Peter. I don't know what you said to him yesterday afternoon, but—"

"He hasn't told you?"

Mr. Trubody smiled. "I'm not always in Peter's confidence. But I can guess. It's a bit of a headache. He swears Miss Ambrose damaged his Aqua-Lung, and he wants me to have it out with her."

"I see."

"There are wheels within wheels here. You see, Peter and Faith are twins, and very close to each other. Peter has got it into his head that Miss Ambrose was behind Faith's having to leave her school last year—I mean, that Miss Ambrose did it out of some personal spite."

"And what do you think yourself?"

"I was far from satisfied by the headmistress's account of things. But I was not in a position to fight the case, so I had to take Faith away."

"And now Peter is doing the fighting, a guerrilla campaign?"

Mr. Trubody looked just a little huffy. He had had his children late in life, and now as a widower was inclined to spoil them or let them go their own way, Nigel surmised; the twins were by no means a wholly favorable testimonial to their upbringing.

"Guerrilla campaign? Surely that's putting it a bit too strongly, Strangeways?"

Nigel decided against telling Trubody yet what Clare had overheard at Delos. "Peter wants justice done to his sister, he told me. I'm not sure how scrupulous he would be in forwarding the good cause," said Nigel cautiously.

"There's nothing vicious about the boy. Are you suggesting—"

"You saw the hole in the tube of the Aqua-Lung?"

"Certainly."

"Do you think it could have been bored by a small pair of nail scissors? In twenty minutes, say?"

"What's in your mind?" asked Mr Trubody, glancing shrewdly at him.

"There's a possibility that Peter could have made the hole himself."

"But—but that's a fantastic suggestion. Sheer melodrama."

"The young can be melodramatic. And is it any less fantastic to suppose that Miss Ambrose did it, tried to drown your son?"

"The woman is unbalanced."

"I agree. But I doubt if she could have made that hole with nail scissors. Are we to suppose that she kept some large, sharp-pointed instrument secreted about her person, on the off-chance that she could get hold of Peter's Aqua-Lung and damage it?"

Mr. Trubody smoothed his neat mustache. He was shocked, but not incapable of judging a proposition on its merits.

"What could Peter expect to get out of such a—such an extraordinary trick?"

"Well, perhaps he hoped it would produce a showdown between Miss Ambrose and yourself."

"I don't follow you."

"He believes, rightly or wrongly, that she was responsible for your daughter's trouble at school and for the brain fever which resulted from it. He believes Miss Ambrose persecuted Faith. It is possible—I don't say it's the truth—that Peter has decided to persecute Miss Ambrose back."

"Oh, come, come! Boyish pranks, yes; but not cold-blooded vindictiveness like that."

"Well, of course, you know Peter best. But he passionately wants his sister's name cleared, as he puts it. It may be that he thinks, if he could break Miss Ambrose down, she could be made to confess that her accusations against Faith were false. That's what I meant by persecution campaign."

There was a silence Mr. Trubody fiddled with his gold cigarette case, took out a cigarette, stared at it, put it back. He was seeking, Nigel guessed, to adjust his mind to the idea of Peter as a Vindice—the seventeen-year-old, conventional, rather pompous house prefect, the clean-limbed, clean-living son, playing about in such muddy waters.

"How do you come into this?" he asked at last.

"I don't think it would do anyone any good—not even Peter and Faith—if Miss Ambrose were pushed over the edge."

"No," said Mr Trubody after another pause "I simply cannot credit it. I've always found Peter a responsible boy. Mind you, he is reckless physically. But just now he's at the stage of taking himself very seriously—well, a bit self-important and priggish. I can't see him acting in such a *childish* way; he'd think it beneath his dignity."

"Perhaps it's the sea air."

Mr. Trubody frowned at what seemed to him a flippancy.

"Cruise life," continued Nigel, "does breed irresponsibility. Look at all the shipboard 'romances.' And it's easy for boys of seventeen to regress into childishness, particularly when they have an overdose of responsibility at school. It's kind of compensation."

"You may be right," said Mr. Trubody briskly, with the air of closing a business conference. "I'll keep an eye on the boy. Talking of shipboard romances, Peter's a bit sweet on the sister, have you noticed? Well, calf love won't do him any harm. Attractive woman. Perhaps she'll put all this nonsense about Miss Ambrose out of his head."

Yes, thought Nigel, it's all very easy and civilized; but, like a good many business high-ups, you haven't much time for personal moral problems.

III

Clare and Nigel sat outside a little café facing the harbor, with glasses of ouzo and iced water on the table. The whole population of Kalymnos, it seemed, had turned out to inspect the visitors. A handsome boy, carrying a tray of cakes, stopped at their table, was driven away by the café proprietor, and soon drifted back. Nigel bought some cakes; then Clare took out her sketchbook and began a quick sketch of the boy. A crowd of children instantly collected, were dispersed by one of the Tourist Police, and reassembled as soon as he had moved on. Barefoot, swarthy, ragged, they had enough vitality to power a factory; the girls tended to group themselves at a little distance, giggling or staring pertinaciously at Nigel: the boys were bolder; they crowded around Clare, breathing down her neck, yelling encouragement to the cake boy, who struck a variety of attitudes in front of Clare.

Presently she took out the leaf and presented her sketch to him. He held it in both hands, with a natural reverence that she found most moving, then selected four more cakes and gave them to her, his face positively floodlit with pleasure and pride.

A larger, sullen-looking boy, who had been standing nearby but dissociating himself from the general fraternization, now moved away.

"Do not mind him. He is political. Communist," said the cake boy.

"You speak English, then."

"I learn. In school."

"You will go to America?"

"No. I stay here My father is the most good baker in Kalymnos. Then I shall be the most good."

After they had been chatting a while, the sullen-looking boy returned, with a small octopus writhing around his hand and wrist. He bashed the octopus many times on the cobbles. Clare was about to protest, but the cake boy said: "Make more soft More good to eat."

The sullen boy, throwing back his hair and smiling cautiously at Clare, offered her the octopus She accepted it with every appearance of delight. After a tactful interval, Nigel gave the boy a fifty-drachma note. He stared at it: astonishment, suspicion, greed, and pride chased one another over his face. Then he beamed from ear to ear, and suddenly raced off with the note as if he had stolen it The mob of children, yelling, pursued him; two of them, in sheer excess of emotion, hurled themselves off the quayside into the sea.

"What on earth am I to do with this octopus?" asked Clare desperately. "It's not dead yet."

"Eat it alive, darling."

"I don't even like them cooked. It's like eating strips of rubber ball. Hello, isn't that Nikki?"

The children having dispersed, they could see right along the quayside to the harbor offices near which they had disembarked. The square-shouldered figure of the cruise manager was moving away from them, a hundred yards off. He was alone. He glanced around once or twice, and his gait was that of a man who, without actually walking on tiptoe, seeks not to attract attention. He kept close to the walls of the white and blue houses, walking in their shadow, and in a moment was lost to view.

"Tomcat on the prowl," said Clare lazily. "He's after your glamorous brunette, bet you anything."

"She's not my—what makes you think that?"

"I espied them on the sun deck after breakfast. Nikki was pointing out the landscape to Melissa. He was pointing away to the left of the harbor—the direction he's walking in now."

"Oh well, good luck to him But," he added, echoing Clare's own thought, "how will they ditch Ianthe?"

"You're looking very handsome, love," said Clare. "In your dilapidated way."

Nigel gazed back at her The black waterfall of hair pouring over her shoulders, the skin, white and lustrous as magnolia flowers, which the sun had hardly touched, the deep, dark, velvety eyes; the pale-rose-colored mouth. He seemed to be seeing Clare for the first time. How many times she had made him see her for the first time!

"Yes?" he said.

"Yes." She was breathing a little faster, and the blood faintly mantled her pale skin.

"Shall we go back to the ship?"

"No. I want the sun on me. You and the sun."

"Let's explore the island, then."

"Let's explore the island."

IV

"What are you afraid of?" said Faith Trubody. She was trembling all over, herself.

"You, my dear. And myself." Jeremy Street cast an uneasy look around him. The hillside fell away at their feet, stony and empty. There was no wind off the sea. The pine trees overhead did not even whisper. It was early afternoon.

"Don't you understand? I love you," the girl said, intensely, almost angrily.

"You're very sweet, Faith. And very young."

"I'm seventeen."

"And I'm nearly three times your age."

"What does age matter?" The girl's voice was fierce, and her irregular teeth showed.

"You look like a fierce little snarling fox."

Faith shivered again. "When you talk to me, it makes me tremble, like the pedal notes of an organ I can't help it."

An expression of weariness came over the man's face. These yearning females and their pathetic, pseudoliterary talk.

"Look, Faith, you're a child still. Your father trusts me."

"Damn my father! And if you tell me I'm a child again, I'll hit you But I suppose you get dozens of women throwing themselves at your head."

"Good gracious, no! I'm a back number now." For once there was a trace of real emotion in Jeremy Street's voice—the emotion of self-pity.

"You a back number! But everyone thinks you're wonderful—your lectures, your books. Everyone," she added, with the fatal honesty of youth, "everyone but the Bross."

The schoolgirl nickname irritated Jeremy. Another wave of depression, deadly as a nausea, swept through him He thought of his expensive tastes, and his dwindling private income; the sales of his books declining, the slackening demand for his services as a lecturer. The slump had started, or

so he had convinced himself, when Miss Ambrose began to attack him in the *Journal of Classical Studies*, three years ago.

She was like a corrosive acid eating away at his pride and his pocket. His antipathy to this woman had been accumulating for a long time, poisoning his system all the more because his vanity prevented him from revealing to anyone how deeply she wounded him. All his fear of failure was now focused upon Ianthe Ambrose; resentment had deepened into hatred, and might soon become a monomania. The public humiliation she had inflicted on him after his last lecture kept nagging at him like a chronic heartburn.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Faith.

"Miss Ambrose."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about her. She's just a sour old Lesbian."

"I'm not worrying about her," the man irritably replied. "But she's a public nuisance."

"I hate her too, actually."

Jeremy looked down at the girl who lay beside him. His exasperation with Ianthe, and his unadmitted fear of her, were suddenly transferred to an easier prey. Dragging Faith into his lap, he began to kiss her violently, as if releasing on the girl a pent-up fury. She went rigid, her sharp teeth locked together in a kind of rictus; then, softening, she flung her arms around his neck.

Presently, leaning back against Jeremy's shoulder, she said, "So it's like that."

"Like what?" he muttered.

"Hard. Cruel. As if you hated me."

"I ought to hate myself for it."

Faith shook her blond head impatiently. For all her infatuation, she could recognize insincerity now when she heard it.

"Hate yourself? Just for kissing me? Don't be silly."

The slight contempt in her voice pricked his vanity. He pushed her down, and had begun to go further than kissing when a flash of light along the hillside, a hundred yards away, caught his eye.

"What's that?"

"Go on! Make love to me!" The girl's eyes were shut.

"I think someone may be watching us. Binoculars. I saw a flash."

"Oh, damn!"

The childish crudity of it made him wince with distaste. He drew back from the flushed, tousled girl. But, if they had been observed, it would be all up with him. Mr. Trubody was an influential man.

"Your father would go up in smoke, wouldn't he?"

"Daddy? Why should he know about it?"

"I mean, if I told him I wanted to marry you."

"*Marry* me?" Faith sat bolt upright, her face averted. Oh God, thought Jeremy, she's going to say "Goody!"

"Oh no, Jeremy. That's quite different. I don't want to *marry* you. I don't want to marry anyone yet."

"Well, what the devil—?"

"I'm mad about you, of course. But I want experience."

"Oh, I see," he said, bitterly confounded. "I was to give an elementary course in sex? That was your idea? Well, you certainly need one."

Faith smiled secretly. She was tasting for the first time her woman's power, and she liked the taste. Her green eyes looked into his, not shyly now. "You do want me," she said.

"I don't want that person with binoculars to go rushing off to your father and tell him I was trying to seduce you."

"Yes. That would be a bit awkward."

"Awkward!" Jeremy Street's mind was a confusion of feelings; but soon they all slipped into the deep, familiar groove and went whirling around there. Ianthe Ambrose was responsible for this new predicament, too. If Ianthe's hostility had not become an obsession with him, he would never have got into this false position with Faith Somehow, Ianthe must be silenced. And there was Mr. Trubody. Money and influence. Jeremy had been making up to the Trubodys during the cruise, with the plan of diverting some of the Trubody wealth into a cultural project from which he would himself largely benefit. He had harped on the theme of Big Business as patron of the arts, and laid himself out to impress Mr. Trubody. But Ianthe's performance at his last lecture must have undone all his good work. To marry Faith—and of course, he managed to persuade himself now, he had never intended it as a serious proposal—would have been a desperate expedient indeed. And tonight, before the dance, he had to lecture again, his last chance, maybe, to re-establish himself in Mr Trubody's shrewd eyes as a worthy candidate for patronage. Yes, Ianthe Ambrose must be dealt with, and quickly.

He looked at his watch, got to his feet abruptly, shouldered the haversack in which they had brought their picnic lunch

"I've got to be off," he said, not looking at the girl. Even in his present state of mind, he was piqued because she made no attempt to delay him

He set off down the hillside. Faith lay back under the pines, a little, sharp smile on her face—a look, almost, of gloating There was the same expression on the face of the man who now, unobserved by Faith, detached

himself from behind the boulder, a hundred yards away, and, with his camera slung around his neck, followed Jeremy Street down toward the harbor.

V

Later that afternoon, Primrose Chalmers and her parents were plodding along the dusty track that led westward from the port. They had visited a Venetian castro in the hills during the morning, had a picnic and a siesta, and were now in search of a place to bathe.

About a mile from the little town, the winding track turned to the right around an escarpment, and a deep cove was disclosed. On the far side of the cove there was a tumble of rocks, and above them the track disappeared around another escarpment. Among these rocks two women were sitting. The bright-yellow bathing cap of Melissa Blaydon showed like lichen against a gray-black boulder.

The Chalmerses rounded the inlet, and from the road above hailed the two women.

"Hallo! What a marvelous spot you've found for a bathe. May we share it with you?"

"It's no good," called Ianthe Ambrose, who had got to her feet. "Absolutely black with sea urchins. We're just sunbathing"

There was a safe beach, she added, half a mile further on.

"That's got rid of them," she said to Melissa when the Chalmerses had padded off around the escarpment. "I couldn't face an afternoon of that abominable child."

"Do you suppose there really are sea urchins there?" the abominable child was saying to her parents. "Or does she want to hog it all for herself?"

"Well, Nikki did warn us that we ought to go to one of the regular bathing beaches."

"The water looked lovely and deep there. I bet Nikki told Mrs. Blaydon about it privately, so she could wallow all by herself"

"Come now, Primrose. That's not a very disinterested remark, is it?" said her mother mildly.

"Nikki's not a very disinterested man, where Mrs. Blaydon is concerned," the child replied in dogmatic tones.

"It is unwise, Primrose," her father stated, "to oversimplify any problem which stems from sexuality." He developed his theme, Primrose trailing beside him, her lower lip stuck out, till the track brought them to a strip of

concrete paving, a few abandoned huts, and a small, stony beach below them.

It was not a very appetizing spot for a bathe, but at least there were no rocks immediately visible and therefore no sea urchins.

Primrose splashed about for a little, in a preoccupied way, then put on her clothes again and left her parents, who were discussing Melanie Klein's findings on the significance of the Inability to Mourn. She went half a mile back along the rough road, having researches of her own to pursue, and was presently peering around the escarpment which jutted out above the western side of the cove.

Curiosity had brought her thus far, fear held her back from approaching any nearer. She wished to prove her theory that the cove was really a safe, an ideal place for bathing, but she had a healthy respect for Miss Ambrose's tongue—the teachers at her own progressive school had never, even under the greatest provocation, spoken to her as Miss Ambrose did. It would be gratifying, reflected Primrose, to prove that Miss Ambrose had lied about the presence of sea urchins.

Unfortunately, the steep, bouldered slope between the track and the sea concealed from her, as she peered around the escarpment, the spot where the two sisters had been sunbathing. She thought of climbing higher up the escarpment, so that she might overlook them. But at this moment her eye was caught by an object gradually floating out into view from under the overhang of the rocks From its shape and color, she deduced what this object must be—her sight was not good enough to descry it clearly. For a few minutes, nothing more happened Then there came a splashing sound, and the dark sleek head of a swimmer appeared; the swimmer retrieved the object which had floated out from shore, and swam back out of Primrose's view again.

The child left her point of vantage, and, returning to the beach where her parents were still talking, took out the notebook and pen from her sporran The pen, she discovered, had run dry. So she borrowed a pencil from her father, sat down at a little distance, and wrote up her recent observations. Her tongue stuck out at one side of her mouth as she made her notes. She felt pleased with herself. Miss Ambrose *had* lied. Lied, it was possible, not only about the sea urchins, but . . .

Primrose put away the notebook and began to think up a plan.

Half an hour later the Chalmers family started back for the harbor. The sun was declining toward the west, so that the nearer side of the cove, as they approached it, was now in shadow. They rounded the promontory Among the rocks on the cove's opposite shore, in full sunlight, sat a woman

wearing a bathrobe. She waved to them As they came nearer and saw it was Melissa, she draped a towel around her head: the yellow bathing cap, her bikini, and her dress were spread out on a rock, the wicker case lay beside her.

"Did you bathe after all, Mrs. Blaydon?" said Mrs. Chalmers.

"Yes. It's all right this side. I'm afraid my sister was fussing."

"Well, don't be late. The *Menelaos* leaves in three-quarters of an hour, you know," said Mr. Chalmers, looking down at Melissa from the track.

"I won't."

"Where's Miss Ambrose?" asked Primrose.

"She went on ahead. You may catch up with her."

They did not, however, see Ianthe Ambrose on their way back to the harbor. At the quayside there was a group of passengers, waiting for the next boat to take them back to the *Menelaos.* Mrs. Hale carried a huge sponge in her string bag. On a bollard, apart from the others, sat Peter Trubody. He was staring at nothing in particular—or perhaps at some picture in his own mind; the boy's eyes had such a haunted, sick look, his whole attitude was so dejected, that Mr. Chalmers asked him if he was feeling all right.

"Why shouldn't I be? You're the third person who—for God's sake leave me alone!" Peter ungraciously muttered.

The boy, said Mr. Chalmers to himself, has had a traumatic experience.

VI

"Oh dear, I am sleepy," yawned Clare. "And it's only six o'clock."

"I'm not surprised. Considering—" Nigel's words were cut off by a third bellow from the *Menelaos'* steam whistle, followed by an outbreak of shouting and gesticulation from the sailors who were about to haul up the gangway. A boat was putting out from the harbor, a man standing up in the bows waving frenziedly. When it drew alongside, the caique was seen to contain three boatmen, a mob of children, Peter Trubody, and Melissa Blaydon.

Nigel watched a sailor go down the gangway and help her out She was limping heavily. Her face was half concealed by a headscarf

"I turned my ankle on the way back. Awfully stupid of me. These damned roads of yours!" she said to Nikki, who was standing with a solicitous expression at the head of the gangway.

"I'll tell Dr. Plunket to come to your cabin."

"No, no, certainly not, Nikki. It doesn't need that sort of treatment," she added, in a low voice, giving the cruise manager a deep look.

Rummaging in her bag, she handed her landing card to the smart, white-uniformed quartermaster who waited nearby, thanked Peter for his escort, and hobbled off, carrying her wicker case, toward her cabin.

"So they did," was Clare's comment.

"Who did what?" asked Nigel.

"Melissa and Nikki managed to get rid of Ianthe. I must say they're rather overdoing the circumspection, though."

"Circumspection?"

"Oh, coming back on different caiques. And Melissa pretending she's turned her ankle to explain why she's so late. She'd jump at the chance of a handsome doctor fondling her tiny foot, if there was anything really wrong with it."

"Puss, puss," said Nigel; but he remembered Melissa, on Delos, arching a pretty foot for him to put on her shoe "I expect Nikki has to be careful. Might lose his job if there were complaints that he was carrying on with female passengers."

"The only thing I have against cruise life," said Clare, yawning again, "is that it's turning us all into busybodies and gossips."

Certainly, rumor flies faster and more erratically on shipboard than anywhere else. An hour later, at dinner, Mrs. Hale was able to inform Clare authoritatively that Ianthe Ambrose had returned to the ship in the middle of the afternoon with sunstroke, and was keeping to her cabin but refusing the services of the doctor. Jeremy Street, she added, must be pleased; he would be spared the attentions of Miss Ambrose when he lectured tonight; it was a clear example of good coming out of evil.

"And so," Mrs. Hale added, "is Kalymnos. A horrid, stony place; nothing but urchins—sea and land ones. But out of it came *this.*" She reached down under her chair and fetched up a monster sponge, which she placed on the table for them to admire.

"My wife can't be parted from it," said the Bishop. "She carries it about everywhere, like a guilty conscience."

"No shop, *please,* dear. We're on holiday. Here's Mrs. Blaydon "

The woman approached their table, bearing a plate of fruit. She was wearing the Indian shawl over her head, it framed her beautiful face in an oval of brilliant color. As she went past, Mrs. Hale said:

"I hope your sister will soon be better."

"Oh, it was only a little touch of the sun, thank you. I'm taking her some fruit. She's determined to get up presently and attend the lecture."

When she had passed on, Mrs. Hale said, "More trouble in store for Mr. Street, I fear. What a lot of make-up the Merry Widow has put on tonight."

"Her complexion has to compete with that Indian shawl," Clare said.

"And with yours, my dear, at the dance."

"But she won't be able to dance, with that limp," said the Bishop

"She'll be able to sit out, though," his wife replied, her brown eyes bright with mischief.

"You would never suppose," the Bishop remarked to Clare and Nigel, "that my wife is really one of the kindest-hearted women in the world, when anyone's in trouble."

Mrs Hale flushed at the praise and the implicit, gentle rebuke

The dance was due to begin at 9·30 P M. in the big lounge forward. Jeremy Street's talk, which would be given on the boat deck aft, was timed for nine to nine-thirty. The chairs in the lounge had been pushed back against the walls, and the three Greek musicians were warming up with bouzouki songs Sitting with Clare on a window seat beneath one of the windows which overlooked the fo'c's'le of the *Menelaos*, Nigel listened to the virile, infectious tunes and decided he would not attend the lecture. He noticed Melissa Blaydon at the bar, and how the musicians were conscious of her presence there. The Trubodys sat in a group on the opposite side of the lounge. Jeremy Street, for once, was not with them; Peter eyed Melissa Blaydon across the room with an expression which Nigel found disquieting

Presently Melissa left the lounge. The music seemed to lose a little of its sparkle. Peter Trubody stared morosely in front of him. About ten minutes later, the lounge cleared a bit as passengers went out to the lecture. The ship was rolling now. A wind had been getting up, and on the exposed boat deck Jeremy Street would have a job making himself heard. Some of the windows being open, the thump and swish of waves made an accompaniment to the staccato Greek music.

"Nigel, do shut that window. My hair is being blown all over the place," said Clare, after they had been listening for a while. The musicians had just finished another song. Nigel knelt on the window seat. He was winding up the window when, amidst the rushing noise of the sea, he heard a faint scream and a splash. Ten seconds later, perhaps, the sounds were repeated. There were people larking about still in the ship's swimming pool Nigel looked out; but the canopy over the pool prevented him from seeing anything Late for a bathe, he thought, automatically looking at his watch which said 9.13. He finished winding up the window.

About ten minutes later, Nikki came into the lounge He spoke briefly to

the band, looked around to make sure that everything was ready for the dance, flashed his teeth at Clare. But all this was done, Nigel vaguely felt, without his usual brio; Nikki seemed—was it preoccupied, a little unsure of himself, puzzled?

There was no time to speculate on this The lounge started to fill up again. Trade at the bar was brisk. The musicians, refreshed with ouzo, took up their position and began retuning the violin and guitar to the piano.

Ivor Bentinck-Jones, who wore a dreadful Palm Beach shirt, was in his element, fussing to and fro between the musicians, the more distinguished passengers, and Nikki. As Clare remarked, he was one of Nature's masters of ceremonies.

The dance began soon after nine-thirty. During the second foxtrot, Clare said to Nigel, "My word, Melissa's dressed to kill. Look!" The woman was indeed a breathtaking sight as she made her entrance, in a gold and crimson sari. Limping to the bar, she ordered brandy and sat on a high stool, smiling remotely and mysteriously around her.

It was during a lull, while Ivor Bentinck-Jones was trying to organize a Highland Reel and convey its rhythm to the musicians ("the man's never been nearer Scotland than the end of a whisky bottle," remarked Mrs. Hale), that Nigel noticed Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers enter the lounge, look anxiously around it, then withdraw again. Ten minutes later, they were back. Mr. Chalmers took Nikki aside The cruise manager, waiting till the musicians had finished their number, went to the public-address system, which broadcast throughout the ship.

"I have a message for Primrose Chalmers Will Primrose Chalmers come at once to the main lounge forward. Her parents are waiting for her there."

The dance was resumed. Nigel, going across to get a drink for Clare, found Peter Trubody at the bar.

"You look absolutely marvelous in that dress, Mrs. Blaydon," the boy was saying in a low, intense voice.

"Thank you, sir."

"What have you got on your hair?"

"It's perfumed oil I spray on it," she answered, rearranging with a delicate gesture the sari, which had slipped back a little on her head, revealing the dark, wet shine of her hair.

"Jolly bad luck you can't dance tonight," said the boy. "I'd have loved a dance with you."

"Next time, Peter."

Nikki was in earnest conversation with the first officer, a smart young man in white uniform with blue and gold epaulets Nigel brought Clare her

drink. Nikki took up the microphone and broadcast again the message for Primrose Chalmers. The dancing continued, but it was halfhearted now—some premonition seemed to cast its shadow over the revelers, in spite of Mr. Bentinck-Jones's efforts to whoop things up

When, after the second broadcast failed to elicit Primrose, Nigel gravitated toward the little group near the doors of the lounge, he found Bentinck-Jones at his elbow. Nikki was telling the Chalmerses that he would institute a search of the ship. They themselves had looked everywhere for their daughter, who had slipped away before the lecture was over and not been seen by them since. It was long past her bedtime now, said Mrs. Chalmers

Nikki spoke to the first officer. As the latter was about to move off, Nigel drew Nikki out of earshot of the parents.

"Tell them not to omit the swimming pool in their search."

The cruise manager stared at Nigel with astonishment and a trace of suspicion. However, he spoke again, in rapid, staccato language, to the first officer.

Nikki's anxiety, evident now, was contagious. The dancing petered out, and the passengers stood about uneasily or went on deck. Nigel meditated on the impulse which had made him suggest the swimming pool: a couple of faint screams, a couple of splashes—it was all odds that, as he'd assumed at the time, people had just been larking about there.

It seemed to take a long time to search a ship. There were, perhaps, seventy cabins, the kitchens; the engine room; the ship's boats—the child might have gone to sleep in one of them, or she could have fallen overboard, the way the *Menelaos* had been rolling.

More than half an hour later, Nikki entered the lounge and beckoned to the red-haired Dr. Plunket. Nigel followed them forward along the promenade deck onto the fo'c's'le. The first officer was there; and two sailors—one of them dripping wet; but not, for once, the ubiquitous Ivor Bentinck-Jones. Stretched on the iron deck lay the body of the child Primrose. She was fully clothed, including the sporran.

"My God, this is terrible," exclaimed Nikki. "An accident, on the first of our cruises. What will the directors say? Are you sure she's dead, doctor?"

On his knees beside the body, Dr Plunket looked up. "She's dead all right. But it was not an accident " He pointed to the child's throat where, in the light of the arc lamp slung from the forestay, hideous bruises were visible. "Strangled, and then flung into the pool, I'd say."

The cruise manager was looking half demented "How am I to tell this poor child's mother—?"

"Nikki," said Nigel sharply "Go and find Mrs Hale—you know, the Bishop of Solway's wife. Tell her what has happened. Ask her to break it to the child's parents."

"Yes, yes Sure thing. A most suitable idea. I go."

Nikki went. From the lounge above came sounds of music. The band was trying to get some revelry going again.

"Ought to be 'Nearer, My God, to Thee,' eh?" said Dr. Plunket dryly.

"Will you just look in her sporran, doctor," said Nigel urgently. "Is there a notebook there?"

"No. A handkerchief, a pencil, a pen, a miniature golliwog," said the doctor, as he laid these articles on the deck beside the body. "No notebook. What's the idea? We shouldn't be touching anything till the police—damn it, I was forgetting where we are."

"The police *are* here, more or less."

"What the devil—?"

Nigel spoke rapidly for a minute or two. The Greek sailors gazed at him curiously; one of them picked up the miniature golliwog, stroked its woolly head, and put it down again.

"I see," said Dr. Plunket. "So that's who I've been harboring in my cabin. Well, you've got a hell of a job before you "

How much of a job, Nigel realized ten minutes later. The first officer had arrived with two more sailors, bearing a stretcher. Primrose's body had been taken away to her cabin. The rumor had flown around, and passengers were flocking toward the fo'c's'le. Dr Plunket pushed his way against the tide of them, following the stretcher. Nigel went to look for Clare in the lounge.

As he entered, he saw Nikki, like a figure in a recurrent nightmare, go to the public-address system. Nikki was sweating, his swarthy complexion had paled to a muddy yellow, and his voice was barely under control. Taking up the microphone, he said:

"I have a message for Miss Ambrose. Miss Ianthe Ambrose Will Miss Ambrose go at once to her cabin, where her sister is awaiting her. Will any passenger who has seen Miss Ambrose since the lecture this evening, come to the forward lounge, promenade deck, and inform me. This is the cruise manager speaking."

INVESTIGATION

Listing heavily to starboard, the *Menelaos* turned in her tracks Her searchlight scythed an arc across the sea; on the bridge and in the bows, sailors were looking out. It had to be done, but the ship's officers knew the search was futile Ianthe Ambrose could have gone overboard any time after 9.10, when she was seen to leave the lecture, and on her own statement she had been no swimmer.

It was now nearly two in the morning. The Captain gestured to the second officer, who went out into the wheelhouse. The telegraph clanged; the *Menelaos,* which had steamed some way back toward Kalymnos in the crisscross search, now put about and at full speed set her course westward to Athens The Captain had been in communication with his owners by radiotelephone, and they had instructed him to use his own discretion about the length of the search, then to break off the cruise and return to Athens direct. There, it would be a matter for the Greek police and the British Embassy to sort out.

Nigel Strangeways, who had shown his credentials to the Captain, and been given leave to conduct a preliminary semiofficial investigation, was now sitting in the Captain's cabin. There were also present the cruise manager, Dr. Plunket, and the first officer. The Captain, a gray-haired man with a hooked nose and a brusque manner, motioned Nigel to begin; he understood a certain amount of English, but now and then asked Nikki to interpret.

"I'll give you the facts first, gentlemen," said Nigel. "Mr. Chalmers attended the lecture with his wife and daughter. Miss Ambrose was sitting at the end of the row in front of them. He noticed that she was in a very depressed state of mind; she sat huddled up, her face in her hands, and occasionally she muttered or moaned to herself. Mr. Chalmers thought that the muttering and moaning were by way of being a protest against the lecture—she took a dim view of Mr. Street's abilities—"

" 'Dim view'?" asked the Captain.

"Sorry. She thought he was a charlatan, no good at his job."

"But Mr. Street is a most famous—" Nikki began to protest. The gray-haired captain cut him short with a slicing movement of the hand.

"The lecture began punctually at 9 P.M. About ten minutes after it had

started Mr. Chalmers heard Miss Ambrose give a loud sigh. Then she got up and walked away. Several other passengers corroborate this. Primrose Chalmers, who was sitting at the end of her row, *may* have slipped out immediately after Miss Ambrose. Her parents did not notice she was gone till a minute or two later, and I haven't yet found any eyewitnesses of her departure—it's pretty dark up on the boat deck at that time, and the audience were very attentive—Mr. Street was in particularly good form, it seems. Well now, Miss Ambrose left the lecture at approximately 9.10, and Primrose between 9:10 and 9:12."

"You're thinking there was some collusion between them?" asked the red-haired Dr. Plunket.

" 'Collusion'?" said the Captain.

"Not collusion," said Nigel. "Some *connection* between Miss Ambrose's leaving and Primrose's leaving At 9 13, while I was sitting by an open window in the main lounge, above the swimming pool, I heard a faint cry and a splash. About ten seconds later these sounds were repeated. I looked out, but I couldn't see anything—the canopy over the swimming pool was still in position."

The Captain spoke rapidly to the first officer Nigel guessed he was asking why the hell, in view of the stiff wind that was blowing then, the canopy had not been taken down.

"I assumed some passengers were playing about down there. However, when I heard Primrose was missing, I advised Nikki to have the swimming pool searched. Her body, as you know, was found floating a little way below the surface. We have no proof yet that she was killed immediately after leaving the lecture. We must inquire tomorrow if anyone saw her between that time and the time her body was discovered, and if any other passengers *were* in the swimming pool at 9:13."

The Captain, eying Nigel keenly, nodded approval.

"Let us assume for the moment," Nigel continued, "that the sounds I heard were made by Primrose and her murderer How do we interpret them, *two* cries and *two* splashes, at an interval of ten seconds?"

"Until they do an autopsy at Athens," put in Dr. Plunket, "we can't tell for certain whether she was strangled in the pool or strangled outside it and then thrown in. But the fact that the body was found just below the surface strongly suggests the former. If she screamed as she fell or was thrown into the pool, her mouth would be open and she'd take enough water into her lungs for the body to sink a little; her wet clothing also would tend to pull her down But if she was strangled outside the pool, and thrown into it dead, one would expect the body to remain on the surface for a day or two."

He spoke fast, and Nikki was required by the Captain to translate. While he did so, Nigel saw in his mind's eye the unsightly body of Primrose, packed among those giant cubes of ice he had watched being taken aboard at the Piraeus, and stored somewhere in the hold, with other meat.

"You were talking about the sounds," said the Captain.

"Yes. *Two* splashes. Did the murderer strangle Primrose on the edge, throw her in, see she was not quite dead, and jump in himself to finish the job? Did the child manage to scramble out of the pool after the first attack, and have to be thrown back into it? And these are not the only possibilities."

"I do not think this is important," said the Captain.

"It *may* be important, in deciding whether the murderer was Miss Ambrose herself."

Nikki's brown eyes bulged. "Oh, but surely she committed suicide—threw herself overboard?"

"She might have done that after killing Primrose "

"Or *because* she had killed her?" suggested the doctor.

"The point is this," said Nigel. "Miss Ambrose could not swim, or always said she couldn't. The water in the swimming pool is kept at a level of about five and a half feet. Miss Ambrose was rather less than that in height. So she could hardly strangle the child *in* the pool. But, if she strangled her on the deck, what was the second splash?"

"You heard two cries," said the Captain in his slow English. "Of a man, or a woman?"

"I can't be sure. I'd say they were female. Or a boy's But the wind was blowing too hard. What is inconceivable is that the child's death and Miss Ambrose's disappearance, within an hour of each other, should be unconnected. Miss Ambrose had been in a suicidal frame of mind—there's plenty of evidence for that. But she has left no suicide note" (Nikki translated this for the Captain) "and she went to the lecture; you don't go to a lecture if you're just about to kill yourself."

"Suicides do some damned queer things; but I'm inclined to agree," said Dr. Plunket

"You have a theory?" Nikki asked.

"Several people on board had fairly strong motives for killing Ianthe Ambrose. And, since she was obviously unbalanced, a murderer could calculate that her disappearance, when he pitched her overboard, would be put down as suicide. The obvious theory is that Primrose saw him throwing Ianthe off the ship, and had to be silenced."

"But you do not think it happens so?" said the Captain. He went off into a Sten-gun burst of Greek, which Nikki translated—

"The Captain says, have you ever tried to throw a full-grown woman over the rail of a ship? Also, there were many people on deck."

"Tell the Captain I haven't, but the fo'c's'le is little used by passengers unless they're bathing in the pool."

When Nikki had translated, Nigel went on, "There is an alternative theory—that the murderer's object was to kill Primrose, that Ianthe saw him doing it, and so he had to silence her."

"But why not strangle Ianthe and push her into the swimming pool too?" asked Dr. Plunket.

"Why should anyone want to hurt a harmless kid like this Primrose Chalmers?" Nikki said.

"I don't know about 'harmless.' She pried about and eavesdropped among the passengers, and wrote it all down in a notebook. That notebook could be dynamite"—Nigel paused while Nikki translated—"and it has disappeared. She always kept it in her sporran—that leather pouch she wore over her skirt. The notebook was not in the sporran when Dr. Plunket examined the body. And Mr. Chalmers cannot find it anywhere in their cabin."

"But the chap wouldn't have to murder the kid to get hold of the notebook," Dr. Plunket objected "He could just take it from her"

"That depends. She'd still have the information in her head after the notebook had been taken."

"Well then, she *would* be dangerous to the murderer"

"Not necessarily."

"I don't get you," said Dr. Plunket.

"She'd only be dangerous to him if she realized the importance of her knowledge Captain, I'd like a word with the sailors who found the body."

The Captain rattled out orders. The first officer left the cabin A steward entered, carrying cups of Turkish coffee, and the Captain uncorked a bottle of brandy.

When the first officer returned with the two sailors, Nigel questioned them through Nikki. Their evidence proved interesting. They had searched the fo'c's'le, then one of them had gone into the swimming pool (they had left this to the last, Nigel surmised, because like so many sailors they disliked physical contact with the element from which they made their living) After dragging out the body, one of the sailors went to report to the first officer. The other was accosted by a passenger, who came through the doorway from the promenade deck. Closely questioned by Nigel, this sailor

admitted that the passenger had distracted his attention from the body for a few moments, long enough, Nigel believed, to take the notebook. The sailor described the passenger as a short man with a fat face and an American shirt. It fitted well enough the appearance of Ivor Bentinck-Jones.

The passenger, replied the sailor to Nigel's final question, had not seemed especially disturbed when he saw the body.

"I'd like this man to identify the passenger straight away," said Nigel to the Captain, who made an assenting gesture. Nikki interposed with a rattle of Greek—he was pointing out, no doubt, that the owners would take a poor view of passengers being dragged out of their beds in the small hours and accused of robbing corpses; but the Captain overruled him.

Nigel turned to Dr Plunket. "How is Mrs. Blaydon taking it?"

"Pretty hard. I had to give her a sedative. She's not in a condition to be questioned yet."

"That can wait. But I wish you'd do one thing for me. Look at her ankle She sprained it or turned it or something See if it needs attention."

Dr. Plunket stared at Nigel for a moment. "All right. You're the boss."

II

"This is an outrage!" exclaimed Ivor Bentinck-Jones. "By whose authority—?"

"The Captain's authority. I'm glad you agree that the murder of a child is an outrage," said Nigel calmly.

"What? What's that? She was murdered?"

"Strangled. You didn't notice the bruises on her throat when you were examining her body?"

"Examining?—I never examined her body."

"Too busy robbing it, were you?"

Bentinck-Jones's face went dead for a moment, before it resumed its expression of violent protest. "That sort of remark could get you into serious trouble," he said.

"It's just as well there's nobody else to hear it, then," Nigel replied, goading him.

Bentinck-Jones had been brought to the first officer's cabin, which the Captain had assigned to Nigel for interviews. The man had put on trousers and a jersey over his pajamas, his sparse hair stuck up in spikes, and he had forgotten to replace his false teeth. He no longer looked the life and soul of the party.

"If that's your line," he said coolly, "I demand that a witness be present at this interview."

"Are you sure that is wise? You don't mind a third person hearing about your, er, private activities?"

"No objection whatsoever."

Nigel's pale-blue eyes, at their chilliest now, scrutinized the man for several seconds.

"You do realize that you may be responsible for this child's death?" he asked.

"That's the most pernicious nonsense. And an actionable statement, too. I warn you—"

"Responsible for her death, I said. You spun her a yarn about being a Secret Service man looking for E O K.A. agents on board. It wouldn't deceive a child. It didn't deceive Primrose. But you had encouraged her to spy and eavesdrop among the passengers, and write it all down in her notebook. As a result, she discovered something which made her a menace to one of the passengers. Therefore she had to be killed "

"Well, *really!* I invent a little game, to amuse this child—"

"A useful game for you."

"I don't understand you."

"Her notebook would turn up, with any luck, some profitable openings for blackmail."

There was a silence Ivor's mouth made a nibbling movement, his eyes were wary. Like all blackmailers, Nigel reflected, this man has iron nerves as well as a thick skin; let's see just how thick it is.

"You'd still like a witness?"

"I insist on one."

"Very well." Nigel opened the door, outside which stood an armed sailor, went to Nikki's cabin, and asked him to come along As they entered, Nigel caught a flicker of—calculation, was it, or satisfaction?—on Bentinck-Jones's face.

"We were discussing blackmail," he told Nikki. Then, turning to Ivor, "We have cabled your description to Records at Scotland Yard. We shall get an answer this morning, if you are known there."

Bentinck-Jones sat back, his hands lightly clasped over his fat little stomach.

"You are accusing me of blackmail, before a witness? What evidence have you?"

"You started to blackmail me, for example During our donkey trip on Mount Patmos."

"You're dreaming," Ivor protested. But a relief that he could not quite conceal showed in his face; it signified to Nigel that there was someone else on board in whom the man really had got his claws.

"Your methods," Nigel pursued, "are quite clever—in a third-rate way. Sly hints, delicate insinuations first, to try out the morale of a prospective victim. You're careful, at first, to say nothing which could not have an innocent interpretation. That's how you protect yourself. And then there's your double bluff—the professional blackmailer disguised as an amateur busybody—the real pest at work behind the harmless little nuisance. Quite a good camouflage."

Would that get through his skin, Nigel wondered. It did not seem to. The man's expression was complacent, almost contemptuous, as if these charges were too absurd to answer.

"On Patmos you talked to me about 'unmarried couples' in the context of Miss Massinger's possible commission to do a portrait bust of royalty. You were just probing, to discover my reactions. If I'd shown signs of perturbation—"

"Look at Nikki. He's as bewildered by this extraordinary rigmarole as I am."

Nigel kept his pale-blue eyes fastened on the man.

"Very well, then We'll return to Primrose Chalmers. Have you any objection to your cabin and your person being searched—for her notebook?"

"None at all." Bentinck-Jones said it too quickly. Nigel realized with chagrin that the man must have disposed of the notebook he had taken off Primrose's body; he'd had four hours, after all, to master its contents. However, in the remote chance that Bentinck-Jones was bluffing, Nigel proceeded with the search. The notebook was not on him, nor in his cabin. Worse still, the man who shared the cabin with Ivor, and made no objection to his own belongings being searched too, said that Ivor had come into the cabin at about 11:15 and told him that the missing child had been found drowned; they had discussed it for a little, then turned out the lights. He himself had not been able to go to sleep, and could state definitely that Bentinck-Jones had not turned on the light or left the cabin till Nigel sent for him just now.

The body had been found just before 11 P.M Ivor had turned up a minute or two later by the swimming pool. This would have given him less than a quarter of an hour to memorize the contents of the notebook, before pitching it overboard and returning to his cabin. Not long enough, surely?

And then, back in the first officer's cabin, with the contents of Primrose's sporran laid out on the table before him, Nigel realized with exasperation

that all this was a dead end. He had seen the child taking notes, always with that fountain pen. The body had been in the water for the best part of two hours. The ink would have run, the writing become totally undecipherable.

He looked up sharply at Bentinck-Jones. The man's eyes were fixed upon the table where lay a handkerchief, a pencil, a miniature golliwog, and a pen. There was a faint smirk on his face.

"Tomorrow," said Nigel, "I shall be addressing the passengers. I shall tell them, without mentioning names, that there is a blackmailer on this cruise. I shall ask anyone who has been approached by this blackmailer to come to me privately. Whether the blackmailer's activities are linked with the murders of Primrose Chalmers and—"

"You could save your breath," said Ivor Bentinck-Jones, his fat voice grating now, "and ask this man what he was doing in Miss Ambrose's cabin at quarter-past nine last night."

Nigel turned his head. The cruise manager was staring at Ivor, an almost theatrical look of consternation on his face. "You accuse *me?* This is another of your lying blackmails! I—"

"Take it easy, Nikki."

"He is a liar!"

"No, you can't wriggle out of it." Ivor chuckled. "I happened to be following you along the passage, on my way to my cabin You entered Miss Ambrose's—you should always knock, Nikki, before going into a lady's cabin. As I passed the door, I heard a struggle—"

"Stop! I can explain, I can—"

"About a minute later, you passed my own door, which happened to be ajar. You were breathing hard, your hair was rumpled, your tie halfway around your neck, and"—with an incredibly swift movement, Bentinck-Jones reached out and jerked up one of Nikki's sleeves—"yes, there were scratches on your wrists."

Nikki gave the man a bearlike clout, which sent him reeling. The armed sailor looked in, then shut the door again.

"You claim this happened at 9:15?" said Nigel, dancing the miniature golliwog on the table before him. "How do you remember the time so exactly?"

"I left the bar for a minute—the clock said just before 9:15—to come down and get a handkerchief. I came straight down."

And at 9:10 Ianthe Ambrose had left the lecture, said Nigel to himself

"I will speak to Mr. Strangeways privately," said Nikki, glaring at Bentinck-Jones. "I will not speak before this filth, this grinning toad, this lousy heel of a—"

"Pipe down, Nikki. That'll be all for tonight, Bentinck-Jones. Thank you for your help."

"Watch your step, Strangeways. Just watch it. Good night"

III

"Well, Nikki?"

"You do not believe those lies, Mr. Strangeways? He is a blackmailer—you say so yourself—a criminal type."

"But they were not lies, Nikki, were they?"

The cruise manager's prune-dark eyes swiveled away; then, straightening his massive shoulders, he gave Nigel a rueful, a charming, an almost schoolboy look.

"No. They were not. But I did not kill anyone. I could not have killed Miss Ambrose."

"Why not?"

"Because it was Mel—her sister—in the cabin."

"You had an assignation with her, an arrangement to meet her there?"

"Sure thing. While her sister was at the lecture." Nikki opened his eyes wide, flashing his magnificent teeth at Nigel "Oh boy! What a woman! This is private and confidential, yes?"

"We shall see."

"Women are crazy. You know? She says for me to come to her cabin, and when I go there she does not want it, she fights like a cat It is their moods. They are crazy in their moods. And yet she had had a shower bath, and she was naked."

"Wait a minute, Nikki. Let's start at the beginning. When was this assignation made?"

"In the morning. Before we go ashore."

"To meet in her cabin, during the lecture?"

"O.K. correct."

Nigel remembered something Clare had told him. "You're sure the assignation was for her cabin, not for a bathing beach on the island?"

"I don't—oh, I get you; I did tell Mrs. Blaydon about a good place to bathe, where she could be private."

"You told her this as a favor?"

"Sure thing."

"You didn't plan to meet her there?"

"What'd be the use? Her sister was going to be with her."

"But Miss Ambrose returned alone to the ship in the middle of the afternoon."

"She did? Say, I guess I missed an opportunity, then," the cruise manager shamelessly remarked.

"*Did* you miss it? Miss Massinger and I saw you walking away in the direction of the cove."

A shutter came down over Nikki's eyes. "You must have been mistaken."

Nigel let it pass, for the time being, but noted the man's relief when he returned to the events of last night Nikki had gone into Melissa Blaydon's cabin. It was quite dark. Melissa was there—"disrobed, undraped," said Nikki, airing his vocabulary with some complacence. She must have recently taken a shower, for her body was damp and her hair soaking. When she struggled with him, he thought at first she was just playing hard to get; but the violence of her reaction soon disabused him of this notion. "I am not one to take advantage of a lady when she is unwilling," he nobly remarked.

"But didn't she explain why she was unwilling?"

"No. She said nothing."

"*Nothing at all?* How very odd. You mean she didn't even cry out, or—?"

"She fought quite silently. She was stronger than I expected—very strong. I felt she was, well, sort of panicky, desperate. So I desisted from pressing my attentions upon her."

"Very gentlemanly of you, I'm sure. And afterward, during the dance, did she make any reference to what had happened?"

"I didn't speak to her during the dance. I was sore at her."

Nigel gazed meditatively at Nikki, who was made uncomfortable by it and lit a cigarette, turning his head away. Nigel's thoughts were not on the cruise manager, however, he was thinking how peculiar it was that, just before the dance, a woman like Melissa should get her hair wringing wet. Surely, if she was taking a shower, she'd wear a bathing cap? And why had she said nothing, not a word of protest or explanation, to Nikki?

"What has all this to do with that poor child's being drowned?" the latter now asked.

"You get wet, drowning somebody," said Nigel, more to himself than to his companion And Nikki had told him there was something "panicky, desperate" in the woman's resistance.

Nikki was looking a bit panicky himself It might well lose him his job if this episode with Melissa came out. Or the panic might have a more sinister origin.

"How do these landing tickets work?" asked Nigel. "Are they checked every evening, after the passengers have re-embarked?"

"My secretary counts them, to see if there are the same number as we gave out in the morning So we should know if a passenger had been left behind."

"And last night—did you have the right number?"

"Yes, sir. What's on your mind?" Nikki looked puzzled.

"Let us exercise pure reason, Nikki. Either Miss Ambrose was murdered, or she committed suicide. Take suicide first. She could, possibly, have thrown herself off the ship without being seen or heard. But did she strangle and drown Primrose Chalmers first? Why should she? Someone intent on killing herself doesn't take time off to kill somebody else *en route.* And anyway, the evidence points strongly to the child's having been strangled *in* the swimming pool. Ianthe, by all accounts, couldn't swim; therefore she could not have done it. What's the alternative?—that, within a short space of time, a woman commits suicide and a child is murdered, on the same ship, quite independently? Well, that'd be a fantastic coincidence. Take murder, then: Ianthe is murdered, possibly because she surprised the person who killed Primrose. It *looks* plausible. But Ianthe's body is not on the ship. Therefore, if she was murdered, she must have been thrown overboard. But the risk of doing so, with people strolling or sitting about on the decks all the time, would be appalling. And what was *she* supposed to be doing? If she saw someone kill Primrose, she'd yell for help, wouldn't she? Ditto if somebody laid hold on her to toss her overboard—she'd scream and struggle: it'd be a hell of a business, as the Captain said just now, to lift a full-grown, struggling woman over the rail."

"The killer might have stunned her first."

"He *might.* But, if she'd just seen him killing Primrose, do you think she'd have let him come near her? If she was not murdered because she witnessed that crime, you have to postulate two separate murderers operating independently at the same time, or else one murderer who wanted, for different reasons, to get rid of both Ianthe and Primrose, and found opportunities to do so on the same night."

"Ah, that's it!" Nikki enthusiastically exclaimed "You've got something there! It is a privilege to watch British police methods at work. Pure reason! Divine reason!"

"No, no. It just won't do. Several people had motives for murdering Ianthe. But Primrose? A child with a notebook? She wasn't really such a menace. What could she have found out that would force anyone into killing her? Unless—" Nigel paused.

"Unless?"

"—she saw the murderer of Ianthe Ambrose. She did, after all, slip out of the lecture shortly after Ianthe." Nigel yawned and stretched. "Well, I'm for bed soon. Now: arrangements for tomorrow morning." . . .

IV

Immediately after breakfast, the English-speaking passengers were all assembled in the main dining saloon—all, with the exception of Melissa Blaydon and the Chalmerses. At one end, behind a table, sat the Captain of the *Menelaos*, flanked by Nigel and the cruise manager. The passengers muttered to one another, fidgeted, smoked, waiting for they did not quite know what to happen.

"What does this remind you of?" whispered Mrs Hale to Clare Massinger.

"An extension lecture, in a café in a small Midland city," Clare promptly replied.

"The annual general meeting of a company that's going on the rocks," Mrs. Hale suggested. "I hope Mr. Strangeways will be able to handle the indignant shareholders."

Mr. Strangeways was saying to Dr. Plunket, who had just sat down beside him, "How is Mrs Blaydon this morning?"

"A bit dopey still. But the natural Eve is indomitable. She'd made up her face for me. Vain woman; but attractive all right. Pulse normal, and—"

"Is her ankle normal?"

"How you do go on about her ankle. It's swollen—a slight sprain—nothing to worry about."

"When can I see her?"

"Midday perhaps. She was suffering from severe shock last night. Mustn't rush things."

A steward, standing by the door, made a sign to Nikki and put the passenger list under his arm The cruise manager rose to his feet, radiating an aura of confidence edged with sorrow.

"The Captain has asked you to be present, ladies and gentlemen, and hopes you will all co-operate with Mr Strangeways, to whom he has entrusted the preliminary investigation of the unfortunate occurrences which have—er—occurred on his ship."

"He's learned that bit off by heart," Mrs Hale murmured in Clare's ear

"Mr Strangeways is connected with Scotland Yard," proceeded Nikki,

giving a sudden beam like a conjuror producing the rabbit. There was a stir of interest among the passengers, many of whom craned their necks to view the hitherto incognito celebrity.

"You were right," whispered Mrs. Hale. "A lecture. Nikki forgot to say that our distinguished speaker needs no introduction."

Nigel Strangeways was standing up now. The untidy, tow-colored hair, one lock hanging over his eye; the stoop; the furrowed face; the air of purposeful abstraction—all suggested a lecturer of the less orthodox academic type.

"I have no official standing," he began abruptly. "The Captain has asked me to do what I can. When we reach Athens, this affair will be in the hands of the Greek police. There's no sort of compulsion on any of you to answer my questions or co-operate with me in any way. However, the more we can get done before we reach Athens, the sooner we shall be able to resume our cruise. Nikki is making arrangements for the cruise to be continued, even if it has to be a curtailed itinerary. There's no reason"—Nigel's pale-blue eyes gazed non-committally at his audience—"there's no reason why the innocent should suffer with the guilty So it will pay you to co-operate; it will pay all but one of you."

Nigel paused to light a cigarette, face crumpled, eyes screwed up. His last phrase, delivered in the same dry, forthright manner as the rest, had tautened the whole audience.

"Rather impressive," commented Mrs. Hale.

"He's a bit of an old show-off, really—can't resist a touch of drama," said Clare affectionately.

"Last night, as you all know by now, Primrose Chalmers was murdered, and Miss Ianthe Ambrose disappeared. The most convenient theory would be that Miss Ambrose strangled the child and then jumped overboard. But I fear we must not lay this flattering unction to our souls. For reasons I won't go into, the theory is barely tenable. In fact, it's almost certain that the murderer is on the ship still—probably sitting at one of these tables."

Nigel paused for the uneasy stir to subside.

"Miss Ambrose was last seen, so far as we know, leaving the lecture on the boat deck at about 9.10 P.M., and Primrose was missed by her parents two minutes later. The first information we need is this. did anyone here see either of them after 9.10? Some of you probably didn't know them, so we shall now hand around their passports with their photographs in them. The crew and the passengers of other nationalities have already been asked this question, with no result. While the passports are going around, will you please try to remember if you heard any suspicious sounds—those of you

who were on or near the fo'c's'le where the swimming pool is—between 9 10 P.M. and the time when it was announced on the loud-speakers that Primrose was missing."

Nigel's questions produced one piece of evidence. Several passengers identified Miss Ambrose from the passport photograph as a woman they had seen walking along the promenade deck, from aft, at about the time in question. They had not particularly noticed her demeanor. One of the last passengers to look at the photo, a mousy woman with pince-nez, then rose to her feet, saying she had seen Primrose Chalmers catch up with Miss Ambrose on the promenade deck, just before the latter had reached the doorway leading in toward the forward saloon.

"What happened then?"

"The child took hold of Miss Ambrose's sleeve, as if to detain her. She spoke to Miss Ambrose—I couldn't hear what they were saying."

"This may be very important. Did Miss Ambrose seem surprised, impatient?"

"Well, I thought she went sort of stiff—I wasn't really paying much attention, though."

"Did they talk for long?"

"Oh no. In fact, I don't know if Miss Ambrose said anything. She tried —yes, I remember now—to pull her arm away, and I got the impression she wanted to go in off the deck—down to her cabin, I mean But the child wouldn't let go, and said something more. Then they walked away, together, toward the front end of the ship. It all happened, oh, in half a minute, or less."

"Anything strike you about the way they walked off? Furtive, either of them?"

"It's funny you should say that, Mr. Strangeways. I remember thinking how quaint it was the little girl should be taking the lead—I thought perhaps it was some game she'd suggested. And Miss Ambrose sort of fell in with it, like you might humor a kid, though she hadn't been keen at the start. But no, I wouldn't say they were furtive."

As the woman spoke, an unpleasantly grotesque image formed in Clare's mind—of Primrose decoying Ianthe Ambrose away and pushing her into the swimming pool. She wondered if the same fantasy had occurred to Nigel. Oddly enough, it had.

Nigel took this eyewitness's name and cabin number Then he spoke again to the audience in general.

"No one else any contribution? Right. Now this is going to be tiresome for you; but I want all of you to go away and write down your movements

yesterday—where you were, and who was with you, from 9 P.M. till 10:30: make as detailed and accurate a timetable of your movements as possible, please. The police in Athens are bound to question all of us on this point, so we might as well have the answers ready for them. It would be helpful, too," continued Nigel, with no change of tone or expression, "to know where everyone was from midday, say, while the ship was lying at Kalymnos."

"I'm afraid I cannot see the point of that," remarked Jeremy Street, rather loudly. "Miss Ambrose was not murdered on—"

"There may be no point in it. On the other hand, if we all think back hard over yesterday, something may be turned up which will provide a clue to the murderer. And of course, it goes without saying, if any of you had seen or heard anything during the cruise which you now feel may have some bearing on these crimes, come and tell me about it; first-hand evidence only, not hearsay. I shall be in the first officer's cabin, on the bridge deck, from ten o'clock."

Mrs Hale muttered to Clare, "Is it permitted to ask the lecturer questions?"

Clare grinned. "Try, and see."

Mrs. Hale rose to her feet. "If we know about people who had motives for one of these crimes, do we tell you, or would that be considered idle gossip?"

The audience froze into a deep silence.

"By all means tell me. In private" Nigel paused, eying the passengers meditatively. "There are several people on board who had strongish motives for killing Miss Ambrose. But this does not make them murderers. I must also tell you that there is a suspected professional blackmailer on board. Anyone who has suffered from this person's attentions would be well advised to inform me."

Nigel bowed briefly to the Captain, who raised his hand in a half salute, then strode out of the saloon, his departure starting a buzz of conversation.

V

Clare caught up with him, and led him to a quiet spot on the boat deck.

"That woman's evidence was curious, wasn't it?" she said.

"Yes"

"Considering the way Ianthe flew out at Primrose yesterday morning, when we were queuing up at the gangway—"

"Yes?"

"One wonders what the child said to her last night, that made Ianthe go with her to—to wherever they went."

"One does."

Nigel appeared extremely distrait; but Clare could never be sure that, behind even his glassiest-eyed look, his brain was not taking in what she said. So she went on:

"I got a fantastic picture in my mind's eye just now. I saw Primrose pushing Ianthe into the swimming pool."

"Yes," said Nigel, staring at the waves bustling and jostling past the ship's white side. "So did I."

"Absurd, wasn't it?"

Nigel turned slowly and faced her, his back to the rail.

"Why would you push someone into a swimming pool?"

"Because I was in a rage with her, perhaps," Clare answered "Primrose gave Ianthe a pretty lethal look yesterday morning."

"Or?"

"Well, let me think To see if she could swim?"

Nigel's pale eyes blazed. "Now there, my love, you *have* something."

"But we know Ianthe couldn't swim."

"All we know is that she *didn't* swim. The Bishop told me that, when she was a girl, she went through an athletic phase—trying to be a boy, to win her father's love. It'd be surprising if she didn't learn then."

"You can find out easily enough. Ask Faith Trubody. But I don't see what—"

"It'd explain the two splashes I heard. Primrose pushes Ianthe in Ianthe swims a couple of strokes to the side of the bath, seizes Primrose's ankles, drags her in (splash number two), and strangles her, holding her head under the water."

"I should have thought Primrose would run away after pushing her in."

"Not if she wanted to find out whether Ianthe could swim."

"But you wouldn't strangle a child because—do you mean Ianthe suddenly went off her head with rage?"

"That's not the most important question."

"Well, what is?"

"*Why* did Primrose want to know if Ianthe could swim?"

"I see But of course it's all based on our flimsy notion that—"

"You know, there's something wrong with this case. It's all too pat, somehow Neurotic woman, pushed into bath by child, blows her top, drowns child, then in fit of revulsion throws herself overboard."

"I don't see what's so wrong with that."

"Ianthe has been threatening suicide for some time. She goes to the lecture, looking like death. Here's another chance to show up the shortcomings of her *bête noire,* Jeremy Street. Instead, she gives a heavy sigh and slips out after ten minutes of it What does this suggest—that she can't stand life any more, and is going to end it. But, if she was determined to kill herself then, why on earth should she allow herself to be sidetracked by Primrose? It doesn't make sense."

"Yes. Well, if she was murdered, we know one person at least who couldn't have done it."

"Who?"

"The *bête noire.* He was lecturing away till about nine-thirty, wasn't he?"

"To be sure." . . .

Peter and Faith were sitting on the sun deck below the bridge, their backs against the bulwark. As Nigel approached, he got the impression of two young animals huddled together for warmth or comfort Peter scrambled politely to his feet, but gave Nigel a look both defiant and wary.

"Got the handcuffs ready?" he muttered

"Why do you say that?"

"I was heard threatening Miss Ambrose. Miss Ambrose disappears. Q.E.D."

"Don't be an ass, Peter," said Faith nervously.

"*Did* you murder Miss Ambrose?" asked Nigel.

"Well, really!" Peter Trubody was once again the prefect, speaking in the shocked, superior tone of one who censures a breach of public-school etiquette.

"If you didn't, keep out of my hair. Miss Trubody, did Ianthe ever use the swimming bath at school?"

Faith's lips fell open, showing the pointed incisors.

"What an extraordinary—! No, she didn't, as far as I know. Why?"

"Think hard. You never had any reason to imagine she could swim?"

"Why, no. Actually, she never took part in any of our games. Despised them, I suppose She used to go on about the system trying to turn us into substitute boys. I don't know why she was so bitter about it. Sour grapes, I expect. Imagine the Bross trying to wield a hockey stick!"

So that is it, thought Nigel. Ianthe, as a child, dismally failed to win her father's heart by making herself good at sport, by becoming a "substitute boy." So then she reacted violently against games. But she could still have learned to swim in those distant days. So we're back where we started. . . .

Only, *why* should she have said to me, "I can't swim"? Why not, "I don't like swimming"? Another tiny, nagging, probably irrelevant question.

Nigel's reverie was broken by Faith, who whispered to her twin brother, "Why don't you tell him?"

"What's the point? It was obviously my mistake. After all, she went to the lecture—I saw her going up on to the boat deck."

"But it was a very peculiar thing for Mrs. Blaydon to do."

"Don't be so potty, Faith. It only looked peculiar *then.* I was a long way off, remember And I didn't know then that she'd got sunstroke: that explains everything."

"Well, I still think—"

Brother and sister were arguing in undertones, apparently oblivious of Nigel, who sensed that this argument had taken place before, with no agreement reached.

"My hearing is preternaturally acute," he remarked, smiling. "What *is* all this about?"

Faith began to say, "I keep telling Peter that, in a criminal investigation, any fact may prove useful."

"Too true."

"And when it's something so peculiar—"

"Faith, I absolutely forbid you to—"

"Oh, don't be so stuffy and pompous!" exclaimed the girl, without acrimony.

"I'll tell *you* something about criminal investigations," Peter continued. "The police are always having their time wasted by nitwits and busybodies who trot out absurd theories and irrelevant facts"

"That also is true," said Nigel. "But only the chap in charge of the investigation can decide what's relevant."

"What happened yesterday afternoon can't possibly affect the case," said Peter dogmatically. Then he flushed, looking suddenly much younger. "Besides, it's not my secret alone. There are things a gentleman doesn't talk about."

"Oh poof!" exclaimed Faith, giggling. "You told *me."*

"You're different. You're my tiresome, titivating, tumbledown twin."

The two began to roll about on the deck like puppies, tickling each other Nigel left them to it, but made a mental note that Peter must be questioned later. For the present, there was the interview with the bereaved Mr Chalmers, which Nigel frankly dreaded.

VI

The discipline of his profession made Primrose's father a good witness. At any rate, he kept his emotions distinct from his reason and seemed to have himself well under control. Unfortunately, so far as the events of the previous night were concerned, he had nothing to contribute. He had been a little surprised that Primrose should leave the lecture, for she was interested in Jeremy Street's subject; but her parents had never subjected the child to unnatural regulations. It was understood that she would put herself to bed when she felt sleepy; however, when she did not rejoin them after the lecture, and was not to be found in the cabin, her mother had become a little anxious and they had looked for her along the decks, in the saloons and the reading room.

Nigel studied the man sitting opposite him in the first officer's cabin. A smallish man, with a smooth face and a brow that curved back baldly a long way toward the top of his head: the eyes had that mild, attentive yet somehow unfocused look which Nigel had noted before—the look of a man listening, listening, as the analyst must, for implications, overtones, buried voices, both in his patients and in himself.

"At dinner, how did she strike you?" asked Nigel, groping as it were for a light switch in the bewildering, disorientating darkness of this case. "Did she give any signs of apprehension, say, or excitement?"

"I would say she had a secret," Mr. Chalmers brought out after a pause. "She had been thinking out something for herself, or making a plan. Yes, that would be my interpretation."

"You say *'had been'* thinking something out. For some time?"

Mr. Chalmers smoothed his massive brow. "I observed that Primrose was unusually silent yesterday afternoon, after we had bathed."

"Could you tell me about this—all the detail you remember?"

In his practiced way, Mr. Chalmers marshaled the facts. "We visited the Venetian castro, picnicked on a hill nearby, then rested for a while. My wife wanted to bathe, but we did not know just where the bathing beaches were situated. So we walked down to the port, and then at a venture took a track leading westward out of the town, above the sea. Presently we came to a cove—about a mile from the port, I think. Miss Ambrose and her sister were sunbathing among the rocks on the far side. It looked a good place for a bathe, but they told us it was infested with sea urchins. So we went on further."

"Which of them told you this?"

"Miss Ambrose. I thought it might be an irrational phobia of hers, but my wife did not like Primrose to risk the sea-urchin possibility."

"Did Mrs. Blaydon say anything?"

"I do not think so. She waved when we left them Her sister said there was a better beach further on."

"What time was this meeting?"

"I am always very vague about time." Mr. Chalmers' thin lips stretched in a simulacrum of a smile. "It would be, perhaps, around three o'clock"

"And then?"

"We moved on, about half a mile, till we found another beach. We bathed. Then Primrose wandered off by herself."

"Which way did she go?"

"Back along the track we'd come by."

"How long was she absent?"

"I have little idea. My wife and I were discussing a theory of Melanie Klein's in relation to one of my patients."

"Five minutes? An hour?"

"Perhaps half an hour. Not, I think, less It was when Primrose returned that I got the impression of the feeling tone I mentioned"

"What gave it to you?"

"Primrose seemed distrait, absorbed in some—how shall I describe it?—some problem or speculation of her own. She sat down apart from me, which was of course symptomatic."

"Just sat and thought?"

"She took out her notebook and began to write. But her pen had run dry, so she borrowed a pencil from me."

Nigel held his breath for a few seconds, then asked, "An indelible pencil?"

"No, an ordinary one." A barely perceptible wrinkling on Mr. Chalmers' huge brow was the only indication that he had felt anything odd in Nigel's last question.

"You did not, then or later, ask your daughter what was on her mind?"

"Certainly not" Mr. Chalmers' tone was mildly repressive. "The privacy of the child must always be respected."

"She was under analysis herself, she told me."

"Yes. With a colleague of mine."

The ship's telegraph clanged Nigel passed his cigarette packet to Mr. Chalmers and lit up

"You are being most helpful. Will you carry on from there?"

"About half an hour later, we started back toward the harbor. We had a few words with Mrs. Blaydon. She told us she'd bathed after all."

"Where did you meet her?"

"On the far side of the cove—the eastern side; she'd moved over, I suppose, to keep in the sun. Her bathing things and dress were spread out to dry on the rocks. She had on a bathrobe."

"In the sun?"

"Yes. On the western side there's a sharp drop from the track to the rocks, with a shoulder of hill rising just above the track All that side was in shadow."

"And her sister—had she bathed?"

"I couldn't say. Mrs. Blaydon told us that Miss Ambrose had gone on ahead; she said we might catch up with her"

"Did you?"

"No. She must have gone out to the ship before we reached the quay"

"Mrs. Blaydon gave no reason why her sister had gone on ahead?"

"No I remember thinking it was almost the first time I'd noticed them apart Miss Ambrose was something of an emotional vampire I should say"

"Can you give a rough timing for this?"

"No. Wait a minute. Yes, I can. I looked at my watch and told Mrs. Blaydon the *Menelaos* would be leaving in three-quarters of an hour's time. So it must have been 5:15."

Nigel leaned back in his chair His questions had been following the only line that seemed open to him, but, although it had disclosed one or two curious facts, and one really promising detail, Nigel did not see how this line could lead him toward the murderer.

"During the afternoon, did you see any other passengers, apart from Mrs. Blaydon and Miss Ambrose?"

"Not after we walked out of the town I'd noticed Mr. Street and that Bentinck-Jones fellow on the quayside then."

"Nothing at all that struck you as peculiar?"

"Well, I did notice, when we got back to the quay, that young Trubody seemed in a bad way."

"What? Ill, you mean?"

"I judged he had had a severe shock, or was in some acute emotional crisis He rejected my overtures very abruptly. Wasn't talking to anyone. He didn't come out on the caique with us—caught a later one, I presume"

"Yes," said Nigel, "he only just made it. He and Mrs. Blaydon"

VII

Mr. Chalmers had only just left the cabin when there was a knock on the door, and Faith Trubody came in, followed by Jeremy Street. Nigel got the impression that the lecturer had been towed in, rather against his better judgment; at any rate, he stood negligently aside, as if dissociating himself from the proceedings, looking around at the appointments of the first officer's cabin. His lined, handsome face seemed more of a façade than ever—a façade which might at any moment crumble—revealing what? The real man, or emptiness?

"Jeremy's being blackmailed," the girl breathlessly exclaimed. "I told him he must tell you about it. Of course, it may not have anything to do with the murder, but a man who could do that could—"

"Just a minute," Nigel put in. "Could you start at the beginning And do sit down, won't you, Miss Trubody."

Faith plumped herself down on the first officer's bed. "It's that horrible little man, Bentinck-Jones. He was spying on us on the hillside. Jeremy saw something flashing and then—"

"My dear girl," protested Jeremy, a cold irritation in his voice, "if we must wash dirty linen in public—"

"Dirty linen!" A slightly malicious look appeared on the girl's face. "When you asked me to marry you!"

Jeremy Street gave her a furiously angry glance; then, controlling himself, speaking in a clipped voice, told the story. When he had finished, Nigel said:

"But I don't understand what's worrying you. You say that Bentinck-Jones saw you and Miss Trubody in what he interpreted as a compromising situation. He followed you down to the quayside, after you had left her, and threatened to tell her father what he had seen. Right?"

"Yes."

"But what proof could he have, to convince Mr. Trubody? It'd be your word, and Faith's, against his, wouldn't it?"

Jeremy Street's head, with its bleached golden hair, shied away like a horse's. "He had a camera, with a telephoto lens," he said, his lips barely moving.

"I see. Has he shown you a print?"

"Not yet."

"I don't know why you didn't bash up his camera, or throw it into the sea," cried Faith.

"Oh, really! This isn't an American movie"

"You see, Jeremy is trying to interest Daddy in some project; and if—"

"For God's sake, keep out of this, Faith!" Jeremy turned to Nigel. "What we—I—wondered was if you couldn't put pressure on Bentinck-Jones and get the film out of his hands."

"Pressure? What pressure?" said Nigel unsympathetically. "I'm supposed to be conducting a murder investigation."

"That's the whole point," said Faith, her green eyes gazing full at Nigel. "You see, last night—just before 9.15 it was—I saw this foul little Bentinck-Jones come up the staircase from where Miss Ambrose's cabin is, and go out on the deck toward the swimming pool."

"You're accusing him of the murder?"

"Well, it's jolly suspicious, isn't it?"

"And the idea is that I should use this information to get back the film from him? Did anyone else see him go out toward the fo'c's'le then?"

"I haven't a clue. I was alone."

"But why don't you do it yourself? If it's a question of blackmailing the blackmailer—"

"This is getting us nowhere," interrupted Jeremy, with a supercilious air. "I should have thought that, as you are in charge of the investigation, you could have the fellow's cabin searched."

"It was searched last night," said Nigel.

"Indeed? Then—"

"But not for camera film."

"Well, then," said the girl, "search it again."

Jeremy threw up his hands in a theatrical gesture of despair.

"While we're about it," Nigel said, "have you two written out your movements last night?"

Jeremy Street took a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to Nigel, who glanced at it.

9–9 30 lecturing on boat deck
9 30–9 35 (approx) talked with a few members of audience.
9 35 went to own cabin.
9 40 went to bar on afterdeck.
10:00 showed up at dance

"Have you corroboration of all this?" Nigel asked.

"I was in full view of about fifty people while I lectured I don't know the

names of the people I talked to after it, though I could pick them out if you held an identification parade. I've no idea if anyone saw me go to my cabin —the man who shares it with me was not there. The bartender may or may not remember my drinking from nine-forty to ten; there was a crowd of Frogs at the bar. Faith will confirm that I turned up at the dance about ten, and stayed there."

Ignoring the man's deliberately riling tone, Nigel turned to Faith.

"Do you confirm it?"

"Oh, I expect so. I wasn't watching the clock, though."

"And what about your movements?"

"I was in the saloon, waiting for the dance to begin, from about nine o'clock. Peter and my father were with me."

"Did you leave the saloon at any time between nine and ten?"

"Oh no."

"Then how did you see Mr. Bentinck-Jones creeping out on deck to murder Primrose?"

Faith bit her thin lower lip, flushing. "I suppose you think that's very clever. I happened to be standing by the glass door into the saloon. That's how I saw him come up the stairs. He went out on deck, and turned right, toward the bow of the ship."

"Right," said Nigel briskly, "thank you. I shall not need you any more, Miss Trubody."

The girl hesitated, gave Jeremy a dipping, sliding look, then made her exit.

"Faith seems to be a congenital liar," Jeremy offered "Like most women."

Nigel made no direct comment on this. "Going back to yesterday afternoon," he said, "did you in fact ask her to marry you, or is that another of her fictions?"

"I did. She refused."

"How very odd."

A ghost of a smile on Jeremy's face revealed that he took Nigel's remark as a compliment to his eligibility "She's a bit of a delinquent, if you ask me —told me she wanted sexual experience, not marriage."

This unusual, if unlikable, forthcomingness suggested to Nigel that the man was feeling relief because they had moved away from dangerous ground, or was babbling to divert the talk from it. He cast about with random questions, on this side and that, waiting for the signs—an involuntary gesture, a too guarded look, or a feel of greater tension in the air—

which told his instinct, trained by much questioning of suspects, that the probe was nearing a sensitive spot.

"Bentinck-Jones wanted money, I take it?"

"Presumably. His approach was exceedingly devious, though."

"Did you promise him any?"

"Gracious, no. I stalled."

"Where did this happen?"

"On the quay. I shook him off presently, and took a boat back to the ship I wanted to get—to think things out"

The asdic in Nigel's mind faintly pinged. Jeremy Street had altered the course of his last sentence; what had he "wanted to get"?

"But you came ashore again. You returned later in the same caique as Miss Massinger and myself."

"That is so."

"Where did you go, the second time?"

"A little way out of the port. Westward. I found a bit of shade and read a book."

The asdic had gone silent again.

"What book?" asked Nigel, quite at a loss for his next move. The effect of this imbecile question was, however, astonishing. Jeremy Street's hand-some head tossed up; he smoothed the hair at the back of it with trembling fingers; his finely chiseled mouth looked suddenly botched. "What a damned, silly, impertinent question!" he exclaimed.

"Silly, I expect. But why impertinent?"

"I use the word in the sense of not pertinent, irrelevant."

"You don't remember the name of the book?"

"Now look here! I—" Jeremy visibly took a grip on himself. With an ingratiating smile, he went on, "No, actually I don't It was some thriller I took out of the ship's library. Fact is, I didn't read much—couldn't get that swine Bentinck-Jones off my mind."

After a slight pause, Nigel asked, "From where you were sitting, could you see that track which leads westward out of the town?"

"Yes. I was above it, on the hillside."

"See anyone you knew passing along?"

"I saw Primrose Chalmers and her parents, walking back toward the town."

"Any idea of the time?"

"Yes I looked at my watch to see if it was time for me to start back. It was between 5:20 and 5:25."

"Miss Ambrose must have walked along the track before then. You didn't notice her."

"No."

Nigel seemed to sense a return of the tension, which had eased after they left the subject of Street's reading matter.

"Nothing else you saw, or heard?"

"I don't think so Oh, there was someone—but it could have been a goat scrambling about on the hillside above me. Earlier. Perhaps an hour before the Chalmerses passed by."

A goat, perhaps, thought Nigel, or perhaps a human goat—one that knew the island well.

VIII

Nigel felt he could get little further till he had interviewed Melissa Blaydon. A sea breeze blew in at the cabin window, fluttering its curtain and tempering the heat of the day. Looking out, he saw sea and sky, and an island hazily remote.

He sat down again, and began to write on a sheet of foolscap paper. It was his custom, in the lull of an investigation, to compile an anthology of oddities—scraps of information, dialogue, query, observation, which had struck him as anomalous and therefore challenging, set down haphazard as they came to mind. Three more cigarette stubs were piled in the ashtray before he had finished

1. Ianthe. Sunstroke, but returned ship alone.
2. "Bathing things and dress spread out to dry on the rocks" Slip of tongue? Freudian? If not, why?
3. A lot of wetness about—Nikki's evidence.
4 What was Jeremy reading? Pornography?—not just after episode with Faith. What would he be humiliated by being known to have read? Or did he return ship to get, not a book, but? ? ?
5 Faith needs her bottom spanked Would take Ianthe's word against hers over trouble at school?
6. What did Peter see on Kalymnos? "I didn't know then that she'd got sunstroke" See (1) Sunstroke explained some peculiar action of Melissa's—something that gave P. "severe shock," acute emotional crisis ? ? ? Well, go and ask him, you silly coot.
7. Pencil, not fountain pen. First importance—follow up Pressure Film
8 Primrose's "secret," her "plan"—to do with Ianthe? Surely Why do you push someone into swimming pool? Clare hit jackpot? ?

9. Nikki said C. and I, mistaken about seeing him walk away from harbor. A lie. Yet he came clean about episode in Melissa's cabin Highly significant?
10. Why did M struggle in silence? Why struggle at all?—she'd made assignation with Nikki No, we've only his word for this. Ask her.
11. No bathing cap in shower? Looks bad. See (3)
12. Can Bentinck-Jones's movements be checked? Under what circumstances could the victim, not the blackmailer, be murdered?

Nigel brooded over this odd assortment, pushing the pieces about, trying to fit them into one another Several of them he fairly soon discarded, as if, coming from some different puzzle, they had got into the wrong box. But the remainder—it was astonishing, the way they built up into a section of a picture, of a fantastic picture which, Nigel now realized, he had already, without knowing it, half glimpsed from time to time.

He added two more entries on the foolscap sheet:

13. Landing tickets. Awkward, but could be fiddled; especially by Nikki
14. Clare: the Bishop: Melissa at Delos. Swans

As Nigel folded the sheet and pocketed it, the cruise manager entered with a sheaf of papers.

"They are nearly complete. I've put them in alphabetical order"

"Very kind. Did anyone refuse to give us a statement?"

"No, *sir* I didn't trouble Mrs. Blaydon or the Chalmerses, of course. And Miss Trubody told me she gave you the data orally."

"You've included an account of your *own* movements last night?"

Nikki looked wounded. "Sure, sure. Why wouldn't I? Oh, and there's a radio message from Scotland Yard just come in."

Nigel read it. Ivor Bentinck-Jones was known to Records as a confidence trickster Did a stretch in 1947. No conviction since.

"Changed his profession," remarked Nigel. "What *were* you doing on Kalymnos, my friend?"

Nikki's lustrous eyes filmed over "Say, what's biting you, Mr Strangeways?"

"Well, the Athenian police can find out—and I don't suppose their methods are as polite as mine."

"Kalymnos, as your great dramatist Gilbert Sullivan wrote, is nothing to do with the case."

"Then why bother to lie about your movements there?"

"Sir! You insult me!" Nikki quivered to the eyelashes with outrage. "We Greeks are a proud people—"

"Are you, personally, too proud to burgle Mr. Bentinck-Jones's cabin?"

"That rat!" The mercurial Nikki beamed. "I will beat him up for you. Anything."

"After I've had a word with Mrs. Blaydon, ask Bentinck-Jones to come along here. Then you can search his cabin. You're looking for camera film this time. I doubt if we have authority for this, but it can't be helped. Don't go breaking things open, though, or you may get into trouble Just collect any film or photographs you find lying about. Oh, and one thing more—" Nigel gave Nikki a steady look—"is it possible to get in touch with Kalymnos by radio-telephone?"

"Sure."

"Then will you ask the Captain to do so. I want the authorities on Kalymnos to search around that bathing place you recommended to Mrs Blaydon."

"Search the—? But, Mr. Strangeways, whatever for?" The look of bewilderment, or consternation, on the cruise manager's face was almost comical.

"They should search the little bay, and the land between it and the harbor, on either side of the track. They will be looking for clues, Nikki, clues—something a murderer left behind him," said Nigel with urgency, his eyes fixed on the other man, who was staring at him as if Nigel had diabolical powers. "Will you first go and find the Bishop of Solway. Ask him if he will step up here, please."

Nikki departed, scratching his bristly blue jowl. Nigel picked out of the sheaf of papers the statements written by Peter Trubody, Ivor Bentinck-Jones, and Nikki himself. These, with Jeremy Street and Faith Trubody, who had already given him the information, were the only people on board whom Nigel knew or suspected had motives for murdering Ianthe Ambrose.

Peter's statement said that he had been sitting with his family in the forward lounge from about 8:45 the previous evening He had remained there till the dance started, except for a minute or two—he could not give the exact time—when his sister had asked him to fetch a stole from her cabin. Thereafter, he was dancing, or talking with Mrs Blaydon at the bar, till ten-thirty.

Ivor Bentinck-Jones—his handwriting had a crabbed, secretive look compared with Peter Trubody's careless scrawl—stated that he was in the bar on the afterdeck from the end of dinner till about 9:15 He then went below to get a clean handkerchief, having used the one in his pocket to mop his trouser leg, on which he had spilled some drink. "I then observed the cruise manager entering Mrs. Blaydon's cabin, under the circumstances of which I have already apprised you and am prepared to testify on my oath."

After this episode Bentinck-Jones had gone up on deck for a breath of air before the dance began. He was in the forward lounge from then on.

Nikki's statement was a good deal more elaborate, and not so precise. He had gone up to the boat deck at about ten to nine, to see that all was in readiness for the lecture. His duties had then taken him to various other parts of the ship. At 9:15 he went to Mrs Blaydon's cabin, was repulsed, retired to brush his hair and lick his wounds, appeared in the forward lounge between 9:25 and 9:30.

The three statements seemed unexceptionable. One would have to make sure that Faith had asked Peter to fetch her stole. Bentinck-Jones's information about spilling the drink struck Nigel as a bit overzealous; but the man could not have premeditated the murder of Primrose Chalmers at this period, for he could not have known that she would slip out of the lecture early.

The Nikki-Melissa episode still seemed peculiar. Knowing that the lecture would be over at 9:30, was it not odd that she should make an assignation with Nikki for 9:15? Only a quarter of an hour before her sister might be expected to return? Whatever one might think of Melissa, she was surely not the quick-time tart. Was it possible that she had never, in fact, made the assignation, that Nikki had seen her enter her cabin and decided to try his luck? He had had encouragement enough, in all conscience.

The subject of Nigel's thoughts now ushered in the Bishop of Solway.

"No, don't go, Nikki." Nigel turned to the Bishop. "Would you help me, sir? Nikki's going to get through to Kalymnos on the radio-telephone Will you be present when he does so?"

The Bishop looked no less puzzled by his request than Nikki.

"You understand Greek," said Nigel. "I just want to be sure that the message isn't—er—garbled."

"Well, bless my soul!" The Bishop shot a keen glance at Nikki, who stood there with his mouth open like an operatic tenor about to launch upon some great, protesting aria. "Very well. What is the message?"

Nigel told him.

IX

It was now barely eleven-thirty. But no passengers had come to volunteer evidence, and Nigel was eager to get the next interview over with; he rather dreaded it, but so much depended upon it. Running Dr. Plunket to earth in his surgery, he asked if it would be possible to talk with Mrs. Blaydon now.

"Well, I said midday, but I don't suppose half an hour will make any difference. I'm afraid I must insist on being present, though. She's my patient, and she's been badly knocked up."

"By all means, be present, I'll make it as short and easy for her as I can."

The doctor entered Melissa's cabin first. Then, putting his head out, he beckoned Nigel in.

The cabin was stuffy with heat and a stale smell of eau-de-cologne, though an electric fan was working at full pressure The linen curtains were drawn over the porthole, muting the light to a kind of dusk. It was one of the most expensive cabins on the *Menelaos*, with twin beds instead of tiered bunks. On one of these lay the bereaved woman, propped up with pillows, one languid brown arm lying on the white counterpane, the other hand supporting her beautiful head, which was half veiled with a yellow silk handkerchief. Even in the shock of grief, Nigel observed her instinct for the attractive pose had not deserted her. She was, as always, exquisitely made up; but her features seemed a little coarsened by the ordeal she had been undergoing.

"It's awfully good of you to see me," said Nigel. "Please accept my sympathy It's been a horrible shock for you, and I'll try to badger you as little as possible. At least it may save you hours of questioning by the police when we get to Athens."

"Do sit down, Mr Strangeways—Nigel, if I may call you that" With a faint gesture of the hand that lay on the counterpane, she indicated the twin bed. "This dear man—" her eyes glanced toward Dr. Plunket—"has told me you are a famous detective. I'd never have thought it. Now, what do you wish to ask me?"

Grief had given the woman a dignity, a calm, which she had not shown before in their brief acquaintance, thought Nigel, the gamine element was no longer in evidence.

"When did you last see your sister?"

"After dinner last night. I brought her some grapes."

"What was her state of mind then?"

"Well, she was very silent. But she did say her headache was much better, and that she'd be going to the lecture presently She didn't seem to want me to stay, so I came up to the lounge after sitting with her about ten minutes."

"You got no impression that she was—well, thinking of putting an end to her life?"

"Of course not! I'd never have left her if—I mean, she didn't seem any

more depressed than usual. To tell you the truth, I'd begun to doubt if she'd ever been really serious when she talked about suicide."

"Could you just tell me about your own movements, for the record? You came up to the bar?"

"Yes. I had a drink. Then I came down here to dress for the dance."

"What time would that have been?"

"Well, I take rather an age dressing I allowed myself forty minutes, the dance was to start at nine-thirty. Yes, so I must have come down about ten to nine."

"And your sister was not here?"

"No. I assumed she'd gone up already, to get a good seat at the lecture."

"I noticed you did not put in an appearance till the second foxtrot had begun. You'd been delayed?"

"Well, I was very hot, so I had a shower. And then a rather tiresome thing happened."

"What was that?"

"Oh, I'd really rather not tell you."

"You don't need to. Nikki has."

The mascaraed lashes fluttered, the head was turned further away from him. "Oh! Oh dear me! But how very extraordinary of him! This is most embarrassing for me. The last thing I want to do is to get the silly man into trouble."

"He says you'd made an—asked him to come and see you at 9.15."

"Does he indeed? Well, I *must* say! I'm afraid the poor doctor is mystified by all this. Doctor, will you *please* let me talk to Mr. Strangeways alone I promise I won't tire myself."

"Very well. But not more than ten minutes. I'll come back then, Mrs. Blaydon."

She gave Dr. Plunket a grateful, languishing look, and he went out.

"Nikki must have misunderstood something I'd said. I did tell him, in the morning, that perhaps I'd see him before the dance started."

"See him privately?"

"Well, yes He'd been getting rather troublesome—I mean, I like him, he's very attractive, but I felt the time had come to cool things off a bit. But then he strode in and sort of pounced on me."

"In the dark."

"Yes. It really was a nuisance, you know."

"You were dressing in the dark?"

"I—? Oh, I see I'd just come from the shower. I suppose he saw me

entering the cabin and followed. I was still—I'd just taken off my bathrobe, and was going to turn on the light, when he bounced in."

Nigel pursued it no further. Gazing steadily at the averted head, the exquisite profile standing out from the yellow scarf, he said:

"I'm afraid your sister did not commit suicide."

"Afraid? I don't understand. . . . Oh God! She didn't—it's nothing to do with that poor child?"

"We don't know yet. When did you hear about Primrose?"

"Last night. After the dance A rumor went around—they'd been appealing on the loud-speaker Then one of the officers told us. It's the most horrible thing. I'd been down here to look for Ianthe; she wasn't in the cabin—it was about eleven o'clock then, and she didn't usually stay up late. I looked for her on the decks everywhere—that was when the officer told me about Primrose—but I couldn't find her. So I asked Nikki to broadcast a message for her on the loud-speaker."

"Melissa, you must prepare yourself for a worse—"

"I know what you're going to tell me." She was staring straight in front of her. "Ianthe was murdered. Isn't that it?"

Nigel did not need to reply.

"Have they found her—her body?"

"No."

"I don't know what to say"—her voice was nearly a wail—"I just don't know what to say. I was afraid of this."

"Afraid she'd be—? Have you any suspicions about who might have done it?"

"Well, she did get her knife into people, poor Ianthe. Mr. Street, for instance."

There was silence. Then Nigel said, carefully picking his words, "I won't bother you with the reasons, but I believe the clue to the murders is on Kalymnos."

"On Kalymnos?" It came out in a ghostly echo.

"Yes. It'd be the greatest help to me if you described exactly what you and your sister did after you went ashore yesterday."

For the first time she looked at Nigel full face, her eyelids were swollen, and there was a bewildered, wild sort of expression in her eyes, as they searched his

"I'll try. If it's important."

Helped along by an occasional question from Nigel, she told her story. The sisters had explored the little town, bought some postcards, had lunch in the open air outside one of the cafès along the quay, then moved off to

find the cove which Nikki had recommended. They met no one on the track which led to it. They must have reached the cove at about two-thirty. They sunbathed for a while—Ianthe had taken to sunbathing the last few days—then Melissa decided to have a swim; the water was deep there, and there were good rocks to dive off. Ianthe, however, spied sea urchins on several of them, below the surface of the water, and urged her sister not to risk bathing off these rocks. It was shortly after this that the Chalmerses had turned up.

"Yes, Mr. Chalmers told me your sister warned them about the sea urchins, and told them there was a safe beach further on. By the way, how did she know there was?"

"Oh, she didn't. She just wanted to get rid of them—particularly the child Primrose got on her nerves. Well, the fact is, Ianthe was rather possessive in her attitude toward me—you must have noticed it yourself. We hadn't met for so long, and I suppose she liked to have me all to herself."

"So neither of you bathed?"

"Not then. Ianthe never did, anyway."

"She couldn't swim?"

"Well, she didn't swim."

"Never learned, as a child."

"I don't remember. And of course, she might have learned since. But she talked as if she couldn't."

"I see. Will you carry on from there?"

After the Chalmerses' departure, Melissa had gone to sleep. When she woke up, she noticed Ianthe, who was lying beside her, looking ill. She said she had a terrible headache. Melissa tried to move her, away from the sea's edge, into the shade, but Ianthe fainted. Melissa soaked handkerchiefs and put them on her sister's forehead—there was no one in sight, to whom she could call for help. Presently Ianthe began to recover; she was in rather a bad temper, and said she must go back to the ship. Melissa wanted to accompany her, fearing she might not be well enough to get back alone, but Ianthe insisted on going by herself.

"She had some special reason for being alone, did you feel?"

"Special reason?"

"She usually kept at your side so much, I wondered if she'd engaged to meet someone and didn't want you to know about it."

"Oh, I see. Well, now you ask me, she did seem rather impatient to get away I put it down at the time to her being irritable, after her faint She didn't really like being so dependent on me"

"It's a sign of convalescence, when people start to get irritable"

The woman glanced at him briefly. "And irritability doesn't fit in with contemplated suicide?"

"Exactly." Melissa's mental processes, thought Nigel, had been sharpened by her loss.

"And you think she might have arranged to meet someone yesterday afternoon, on the island, and that whatever happened between them led to her being murdered last night? That's why you said the clue to the murderer would be found on Kalymnos?"

"It's a theory."

"You think she met her—the person who killed her—on the island?"

"Yes What time was it when she left you?"

"Oh, goodness, I don't know. I've no idea how long I was asleep"

"Was it half an hour, say, before the time you spoke with the Chalmerses again?"

"About that, perhaps."

"You did bathe, after all, I understand?"

Nigel gathered that, as soon as Ianthe had set off, her sister decided to bathe—Ianthe being no longer there to fuss about sea urchins When she finally got out, that side of the cove was in shadow, so she moved over to the other side.

"To dry your dress in the sun?"

"Dry my dress?" The lovely face looked momentarily disconcerted.

"Mr. Chalmers told me you had it spread out on a rock to dry."

"Yes It was maddening. I'd sort of kicked it off a rock by mistake when I was diving in That's why I nearly missed the ship I was waiting till it got dry."

"And Peter Trubody was waiting for you?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you came back to the ship together."

"Oh, I see. Yes, he was at the quayside. But he wasn't waiting for me, as far as I know."

"He didn't explain why he'd left it so late?"

"No. Actually, I could hardly get a word out of him. He seemed in a very queer state of mind. Oh my God! You don't think?—" Her voice broke off, her slim brown hand clenched on the counterpane.

"What don't I think?"

"That Peter could have—that it was he Ianthe had arranged to meet?"

Whatever Nigel's thoughts were on this subject, he did not enlarge upon

them, for Dr. Plunket entered the cabin and firmly told him his time was up.

X

"You can tell Mr. Bentinck-Jones I want to see him now."

Nikki's teeth flashed at Nigel like breakers ahead. "And then I take his cabin to pieces?" he asked with relish.

"You'll probably find the film in his camera."

The camera, however, was slung over its owner's shoulder when he entered, grinning impudently at Nigel.

"And how's the great detective doing? Still baffled?"

Nigel scrutinized him This man, beneath his professional bonhomie, had neither shame nor compunction, the ordinary weapons, therefore, were useless against him; even the protracted silence with which Nigel greeted his arrival seemed to cause him no uneasiness whatsoever. He sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette.

"What are your commands, dear sir?" said Ivor at last.

"I hear you've been at it again."

"At it? That depends on what you mean," Ivor blithely remarked.

"Not what you got a stretch for ten years ago."

"Well, well, so we've been digging up the past, have we?"

"We have And the present. I'll come to that in a minute. Who do you think committed these murders?"

"I haven't your facilities for collecting evidence. Why ask me?"

"Because your profession demands a close study of people's weaknesses."

"My profession?"

"Or hobby, or whatever you call it."

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me."

"You're damn right I have Mr. Street has told me all about your conversation with him."

The man's pudgy, impudent face took on a guarded look. He puffed a little faster at his cigarette, before replying.

"Mr. Street is an imaginative man What was his version of this alleged conversation?"

Nigel told him—spinning it out, for Nikki must be given time, but not mentioning the photograph with which Bentinck-Jones had threatened Street. "Are you denying that you tried to extort money from him by threats?"

"Of course I deny it. You have no proof at all of his story."

"You admit nothing?"

"I admit I saw him and Miss Trubody in a compromising position." The man's tongue licked at the side of his mouth, as if to retrieve a crumb of some dainty he had been eating.

"So you're just a harmless old voyeur?"

"I disapprove of elderly men corrupting minors It is the public duty of any citizen to expose that sort of thing. Or don't you agree?" Ivor made no attempt to conceal the cynicism of his utterance.

"How nice for you, to get moral satisfaction as well as a cash payment out of your hobby. Would you say Jeremy Street was capable of strangling minors as well as corrupting them?"

"There was no question of cash payment," the man replied rather perfunctorily "Street is an egotist, of course, and conceited. Such people do not tolerate obstacles, in my experience."

"Your prison experience? You met some homicides there?"

Ivor grinned like a dog. "I thought our chat was taking a friendlier tone. My mistake."

"Has it occurred to you that, if Street is a desperate character who won't tolerate obstacles, he's a dangerous one to blackmail?"

"I've no doubt he would be," Ivor equably replied "But, as I've told you, I did not blackmail him."

"What is your version of the talk you had with him yesterday afternoon?"

Bentinck-Jones related it, in a leisurely way The gist of it was that he had told Street what he had seen, and that he would feel it his duty to inform Faith Trubody's father, unless Street undertook to lay off the girl.

Shortly after this, Nikki appeared at the cabin door, looking crestfallen. He shook his head at Nigel, who at once said, "I think this gentleman has some film he would like developed. Is there someone on the ship who can do it for him?"

"Sure, sure."

"Your camera, please." Nigel stretched his hand toward Bentinck-Jones, who rose to his feet, exclaiming:

"What the hell is all this? I absolutely refuse—"

"Take it from him, Nikki."

Nikki placed his hand on Ivor's head, pushed down hard so that he folded on the bed like a concertina, and whipped the camera off him. There was a roll of film inside it.

"I forgot to tell you," said Nigel, when Nikki had left, "that Jeremy Street mentioned you'd been taking photographs."

Bentinck-Jones gave him one poisoned-dart look. "I shall complain to the Captain, the owners! This is outrageous!"

"I know. Robbery on the high seas. Talking of which, what did Primrose Chalmers write at the end of that notebook you pinched off her body?"

Ivor's eyes swiveled about the cabin. He puffed himself out, but the tone of outrage was wearing thin. "I don't know what you mean."

"The rest of her notebook was written in ink, which ran and became indecipherable through exposure to sea water in the swimming pool. But Mr Chalmers tells me that her last entry was made in pencil. You could read this. You did read it, before throwing the notebook overboard. What did she say?"

"I never touched any bloody notebook!" The man's voice had taken on a jailbird's whine.

"That's unlucky for you. If you'd been able to give me this information, it might have made things easier for you. As it is, with that photograph you took . . ."

Nigel was bluffing all around. The negative might not be in the camera; perhaps it did not even exist—Bentinck-Jones himself could have been bluffing when he told Street he had photographed him and Faith.

"What is your proposition?" asked Ivor.

"Under certain circumstances, Jeremy Street might be persuaded to keep his mouth shut."

"Don't make me laugh! Of course he will. He can't afford to have a scandal—not where Mr. Trubody is concerned"

"Hadn't you thought," asked Nigel affably, "of blackmailing Trubody himself? All that dough. And his daughter's reputation."

Bentinck-Jones shrugged his shoulders. "I asked you what's your proposition?"

"Very well, you lay off Street and I'll lay off you, but I must know what was in Primrose's notebook."

"That's a most immoral idea—compounding a felony, eh?" The fat little man chuckled. "And if I won't play?"

"I hand you over to the Greek police and pass on my information about you to Scotland Yard, whether Street agrees or not."

"Nothing doing," said Ivor with a sneer.

"I thought not You're forgetting this is a murder investigation. I have a witness who saw you going out on deck behind Primrose, just before she was murdered."

"You're bluffing."

"I'll ask her to repeat her statement to your face." Nigel moved toward the door.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute! I swear I had nothing to do with the child's death."

"And then, after her body had been discovered, you were seen taking an unhealthy interest in it. You stole her notebook because you were afraid it contained damning evidence about your blackmailing activities"

"This is absolutely preposterous!"

"The police in Athens won't take that view. Good morning."

Bentinck-Jones was rattled at last. "If I tell you what she wrote—but it doesn't *mean* anything," he almost wailed

"That's for me to judge."

"You'll guarantee the—the other matter will go no further?"

"I'm giving no guarantees," said Nigel harshly "I'm interested in the case against you as a murderer, not a blackmailer. If you are innocent, you'd better co-operate If you don't co-operate, the police will take you to pieces. They can be quite rough, you know."

Bentinck-Jones's effrontery was all gone. Nigel had found his weak spot at last. the man was a physical coward This accounted for the devious, insinuating approach he made to his prospective victims.

"It doesn't make sense—what she wrote," Ivor was muttering "I can't remember the exact words, but it was something like this: 'A is a liar She said she couldn't swim, but she can—at least, I'm almost certain she can. Because B always wore a yellow bathing cap, and the one I saw didn't. I couldn't see properly, I was too far away and there were rocks in between But she swam out to fetch the wicker case, which was floating away. I thought it was a seal at first, but of course there aren't seals in Greece. I saw the case, and then the arm reaching for it out of the sea, and the black head. Then she disappeared back under the rocks. Why did she never bathe when other people were there? Perhaps she has a deformity.' Am I going too fast?"

Nigel was taking it down on a sheet of paper

"No. Carry on."

"There was a bit about how she hated A. and would love to show her up The whole thing was childish. Then she'd written: 'I suppose it *could* have been B., or some third person, even—but there were only the two when we went by. How can I prove it? A. is a foul bitchy hypocrite She insulted me I shall make a plan and bide my time and have my revenge' "

Bentinck-Jones smiled tentatively. "Quite a vindictive infant."

"Is that all?"

"The notebook stopped there."

"Are you sure you've remembered everything? Think."

"Yes," said Ivor after a pause. "That's everything she wrote. And much good may it do you," he added with a spurt of viciousness.

"Where were you yesterday, after your conversation with Street?"

"Drinking. On the quayside."

"Till you returned to the ship?"

"Yes."

"Near the jetty?"

"Yes."

"Waiting for Miss Ambrose? What time did she turn up?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You'd made no appointment to meet Miss Ambrose there?"

"Why the hell should I?" said Ivor shakily. "I never set eyes on the woman the whole afternoon."

"What time did you go back to the ship?"

"Oh, about five-thirty, I think."

"You were alone all the time?"

"Yes, but—"

"See any of our friends earlier on?"

"Street came ashore again, by himself, and walked off—which way would it be—out of the town westward."

"Was Nikki about?"

A vindictive look came into Bentinck-Jones's face. "He was. In a manner of speaking."

"What manner of speaking?"

"He pretended not to be. I saw him slinking out of an alley, just beyond that Customs House place or whatever it is. I shouted to him. He edged back out of sight. Later, I asked him what he'd been up to. He denied having been there at all—said I must have been mistaken. You'd do well to keep your eye on him," Ivor concluded, "he's a slippery customer."

"What time was it when you saw this alley-slinking act?"

"Oh, about half an hour before I returned to the ship. Five o'clock, say."

At this point, the subject of their conversation entered and told Nigel there were two passengers outside who urgently wished to speak to him.

"Send them in That's all, Bentinck-Jones. For the present."

XI

The older of the two women had a sweet, vague, apologetic look. The younger, Nigel surmised, had thrust her into the present interview

"My aunt has some information for you. Oh, I'm Jane Arthurs, and this is my aunt Emily."

"I'm afraid," said the elder lady, "we are quite unjustifiably trespassing on your time. Shortsightedness, as I keep telling my dear niece, really does rather disqualify me as an eyewitness."

"An eyewitness?" Nikki almost yelped. "You saw the crime, lady?"

"Oh dear no, nothing so—er—helpful as that. I must apologize, Mr. Strangeways, for intruding upon—"

"*Please,* Aunt Emily. Mr. Strangeways *asked* for this information."

"But it *is* so very tenuous," fluttered the older woman, her eyes groping toward Nigel across the few feet that separated them

After a good deal more of this, Nigel brought her to the point She had been ascending the staircase that led up from the maindeck cabins to the forward saloon, at about 9:15 last night, when a woman passed her, going down She thought now that this woman was Miss Ambrose Yes, it could have been just before 9 15. No, she had only caught a glimpse of the woman out of the corner of her eye, and could not affirm with any conviction that it had been Miss Ambrose. The woman had run past, in a hurry. She could not vouch for it, but had an impression that the woman was wearing a rug over her head and body.

Emily Arthur's reluctance to come forward was very understandable. As Nikki said, when the two ladies retired, "Where does that get you? The dame's half blind."

"The rug is instructive—or would be, if it was true. Still, I agree, we can't rely on her evidence. Actually, at the moment, I'm less interested in Miss Ambrose's movements than in yours."

"Mine? But I've told you—"

"Your movements yesterday afternoon Miss Massinger and I saw you creeping off past the Customs House, in a highly furtive and suspicious manner You denied that it was you we saw. Later, about 5 P.M., Bentinck-Jones saw you creeping back. You told him, too, that he was mistaken. What were you up to?"

Nikki's eyes hardened. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again

"I suggest," pursued Nigel, "that you had an assignation with Mrs

Blaydon at the little cove. You also, to be sure that Melissa would be alone, told Ianthe you wanted a private talk with her at such and such an hour in the afternoon. You didn't intend to keep the later appointment, of course."

Nikki was staring at him, between incredulity and horror.

"On the way to the cove, you unfortunately ran into Miss Ambrose, and what happened then compelled you to kill her."

"Say! This is haywire! Mr. Strangeways, you feeling all right?"

"Mr. Bentinck-Jones said he saw you 'slinking out of an alley.' His choice of words was suggestive. Slinking, alley, alley cat, slinking alley cat, tomcat. What woman had you been with? Mrs. Blaydon, or Miss Ambrose?"

"Neither of them."

"But you'd been with a woman?"

"I'm not talking."

"Maybe the Athens police will lubricate your talking apparatus."

"I am a Greek, a brave man. I am not to be intimidated by thugs." Nikki gave Nigel a look of stern integrity. "If I tell you, you will promise to let it go no further?"

"I'm not making any promises. But if it has no connection with these murders—"

"O.K. then." Nikki beamed, in one of his mercurial changes of mood. "I was laying Aphrodite."

"I *beg* your pardon!"

"She is the most beautiful girl in the Aegean. Oh, boy, what a torso!" Nikki sketched an opulent figure in thin air, and proceeded to an intimate catalogue of the lady's charms.

"But why on earth didn't you tell me this before?"

"Aphrodite's husband is a sponge fisher. He is away from Kalymnos during the summer. He is a strong man—stronger even than I. He has already destroyed two men he suspected of the smooch with Aphrodite. That is why she and I meet in a friend's house, and I must be stealthily coming and going There is much gossip on the island—they are idle worthless people—you know. And if it came to the ears of this Ajax—"

"Ajax?"

"He is Aphrodite's husband—he would track me down and rip out my intestines and devour them before my eyes."

"How very disagreeable for you both Would this Aphrodite confirm your statement, if necessary?"

"Would she fuse a bomb and take it to bed with her! No, sir. She is too afraid of Ajax. He bashes her if the dinner is late. He would grind her to powder."

"I see. Well, you spent the whole afternoon with this divine creature?"

"Sure thing."

"But you still had something in reserve, so to speak, for Mrs. Blaydon?"

"With women," announced Nikki, "I have the inexhaustible powers of Zeus the Thunderer."

"And you still claim that Mrs. Blaydon made an assignation with you for 9.15 last night, though the lecture would be over at 9:30—and her sister might be expected to return to the cabin?"

"A quarter of an hour, an hour, five hours—what does it matter?" said Nikki, in his grandest manner. "The music of love has many tempi I will not say the ravishing Melissa made an assignation—not in so many words. But she whispered to me, yesterday morning, that she would see me before the dance, she would be waiting for me. Her eyes told me the rest."

"Including the exact time she expected you?"

"I should have gone to her cabin earlier, but I was detained."

Nigel did not think anything more could be extracted from the incorrigible Nikki, so he asked him to fetch Peter Trubody. Nigel had been sure, for some little time now, that he knew the identity of the murderer and a good deal about the circumstances of the two crimes; there was only one pattern into which the pieces would all fit. Nothing he had been told during his recent interviews disrupted this pattern. There remained Peter Trubody. Nigel felt a marked reluctance to come to grips with the young man; he had a feeling that Peter's evidence would be crucial, and a vague fear that it might explode his whole theory of the crimes, also, he found Peter a tiresome person to deal with—half boy, half man, he combined the adult male's closed-circuit mind with the irresponsibility and unpredictability of childhood.

Sighing wearily, for he was very tired by now, Nigel went out on deck to let the sea breeze refresh him. The coastline of the mainland was just visible, far ahead. In two hours' time, or three, the *Menelaos* would be docking It would be a feat to have solved the mystery and handed over the murderer within the space of fourteen hours; but Nigel felt no gratification at the idea.

The salt wind buzzed in his ears. Tappings and cracklings from the wireless officer's room reminded him that all depended upon the message from Kalymnos awaited there. Smoke was uncoiling fatly from the single funnel and streaming backward over the ship's white wake. The sun, almost at meridian, hurt the eye as its light ricocheted off the dancing waves and the brass fittings on the bridge deck.

Peter Trubody's head came into view, as he climbed the ladder from the boat deck, Nikki behind him.

XII

"Do you smoke?"

"Thanks. I'm not in training." The boy's hand shook as he lit the cigarette Nigel offered.

"I've got about as far as I can with this investigation. It's just a matter now of fitting in a few odd pieces."

"You mean, you're going to have someone arrested?"

"I suppose so."

"For killing that—that vile woman?"

"A child was killed too."

"Oh, I know. I'm not condoning it."

A spasm of irritation shook Nigel. Who the hell was this callow, pompous youth to condone or not to condone?

"You wanted Miss Ambrose dead. You think you've got what you wanted. All right. Why go on being vindictive about her?"

"Did you ask me up here to deliver a moral discourse?"

"No I asked you because I must know what it was you saw on Kalymnos which gave you such a shock."

"And I've already told you, it's nothing to do with the case."

"Peter, who are you protecting? Faith?"

"Faith! Good Lord, no!" The boy had said it too quickly and, as if aware of having given something away, went on with a show of anger, "And I'll trouble you to keep my sister's name out of this."

Nigel sighed. "I'm trying to treat you as a reasonable human being. But if you will talk like the clean-limbed young misunderstood hero in an Edwardian melodrama, we shall get nowhere."

Peter Trubody flushed. He was still sensitive to ridicule.

"Two people," Nigel went on, "have told me that you appeared to be in a bad way yesterday afternoon Mr Chalmers, and Mrs. Blaydon—if you'll allow me to mention *her* name."

Peter again flushed angrily; then, becoming aware of the friendly smile with which Nigel had accompanied those last eight words, attempted a smile himself. Nigel said:

"I don't have to be a mind reader to know about your feelings for Melissa

or to guess that it is she you are trying to protect. I admire you for it, but I think you're going the wrong way about it."

"Perhaps I'm the best judge of that." Peter Trubody had not got the stiffness out of his voice yet.

"Oh dear me no, you aren't. A man in love is the last person to be able to see straight."

Peter was visibly mollified by the status Nigel had given him. "But, you know, it was just something I misinterpreted."

"My point is this—you're not going the right way about things, if you withhold evidence. You don't want the Athens police to start grilling her about it, surely?"

"God, no! But they needn't—"

"I'm sorry. Either you tell me what it's all about, or I shall have to tell them it's a matter they must investigate."

So, at last, Peter Trubody yielded up his story. Yesterday afternoon he had been mooching about the island, looking for Melissa He had tried the two main bathing beaches, unsuccessfully. He then returned to the harbor; but, not seeing her anywhere on the waterfront, he had walked out at random along the rough road which led westward. Turning a corner, he saw the Chalmerses and Primrose ahead, sauntering in the same direction. He had no wish for their company, so he clambered up the hillside to his right. Presently, he found himself on a shoulder of hill overlooking a narrow cove. On the west side of this cove he descried two figures, one of which wore a yellow bathing cap. He had found Melissa, but, as usual, the wretched Ianthe was with her.

"You're sure it *was* Ianthe?"

"Well, I suppose at that point I just assumed it was They were quite a long way off—several hundred yards below me, I should think It was a woman, anyway."

"So then?"

"Well, I thought I'd shove off But I changed my mind." Peter was looking extremely shamefaced, his eyes would not meet Nigel's.

"You stayed where you were?"

"Actually, I went a bit closer—I mean, after I'd climbed away from them, up the hill, I sort of changed my mind."

"You wanted to feel you were at least near her?"

"Yes, that's it," said Peter gratefully. "I suppose I'm an awful fool about her, but—"

"I understand."

Nigel thought he understood only too well. The boy had hoped to watch Melissa sunbathing, Melissa naked.

"I thought it'd be fun to sort of stalk them—you know, see how near I could get without their seeing me. I made a detour. It took quite a time, because I had to be careful they didn't hear me either—there are so many loose stones on the hillside you could dislodge. Well, I got to where I could see them again, from a different angle."

A very curious expression came over the boy's face; rather like the inward, stilled look on a child's when it is about to be sick.

"And you saw—?" Nigel prompted.

"Oh, it's too ridiculous. Melissa let her head fall on the rock, I thought she was dead of course but it was just a faint or sunstroke or something." It all came out in a rush. "Melissa told me during the dance—"

"Oi, oi! Let's get this in some sort of order. Have a cigarette."

The boy was trembling like a foal. Nigel's calm voice gentled and restrained him. Helped out by Nigel's questions, the gist of Peter's evidence was as follows:

He had seen the two sisters at the sea's edge. He was about a hundred yards away, above and to one side of them. Ianthe was lying sprawled on a flat rock half in the water—he recognized her by the dull-colored skirt and jumper she wore. Melissa, naked except for the yellow bathing cap, was leaning over Ianthe, in profile to him, and appeared to be doing something to her sister's neck. Ianthe's head was raised; then Melissa let it drop back onto the rock. It was this, evidently, which had scared the boy. He had taken to his heels and scrambled up the hillside again, not once looking back. It had preyed on his mind so much that later, at the dance, he blurted out to Melissa what he had seen. The explanation she gave completely reassured him. She had been sunbathing, had gone to sleep, and woken up to find Ianthe looking queer. She tried to help her sister into a patch of shade. Ianthe fainted, collapsing onto the rock where Peter had seen her. Melissa splashed water over Ianthe's face; then, with the vague idea that one "loosened the patient's clothing" under such circumstances, tried to take off a rather tight neckband Ianthe was wearing. To get at the knot, she had to lift her sister's head, which slipped in her hand as she removed the neckband and fell back on the rock.

"But why did all this give you such a turn?"

"Frankly, I got the idea—well, Miss Ambrose—I thought she was dead, you see," Peter slowly and painfully replied.

And you thought Melissa had killed her, said Nigel to himself. Gazing full at the boy, he said, "But wasn't it a very curious interpretation to put

on what you were seeing? What made you jump to the conclusion she was dead?"

"Honestly, I haven't the foggiest. I agree it was quite absurd—"

"I'll tell you, then The wish was father to the thought. You had wanted her dead. You hated her enough, for what you believed she did to your sister, to wish her dead. So, when you saw her lying unconscious, your own unconscious instantly made the assumption."

"Do you think that's the explanation?" the boy rather pathetically asked "I expect you're right."

"It might be It might not How long elapsed between the first and the second occasion you saw the sisters down below in the cove?"

"I couldn't tell you. Honestly I'd sort of lost track of time."

"Was it hours later, or minutes?"

"I'd guess it was twenty minutes or half an hour. I'd gone back up the hill, and sat there for a while, and then I'd made this detour, moving pretty slowly."

Peter Trubody was equally unhelpful about the time when these events took place· he didn't remember much about how he had got back to the harbor However, Mr. Chalmers' and Mrs. Blaydon's evidence fixed the time with reasonable accuracy.

"You know that wicker case Melissa carries about. Did you happen to notice it on the rocks?"

"Yes, now you mention it, I did."

"She must have been considerably taken aback when you upped at her later with your suspicions."

"Oh, she was marvelous She didn't get angry, or laugh at me, or anything—just listened, quite seriously, to what I was saying. Of course, I didn't let out what I'd really—" The boy broke off sharply.

"What you'd really thought for a moment—that she had killed her sister?" suggested Nigel.

"I wish you wouldn't put words into my mouth," Peter replied, but wearily, not angrily. Then, after a glance at Nigel, he exclaimed, "My God! You—I believe you think she did! It's fantastic. Anyone who knows Melissa would know that. Besides, her sister wasn't—didn't disappear till last night."

Nigel made no comment on this outburst Instead, he asked Peter if, on his way back to the harbor, he had seen any of the other passengers. It was to avoid the chance of meeting anyone that Peter had returned along the hillside instead of using the track. He had seen nobody, he said, till he reached the outskirts of the town. At one point, passing a ruined cottage, he

noticed a haversack and two books lying on the ground outside it, but their owner was not in sight.

"Did you look at the books?"

"I did just glance, actually. They were lying open."

"What were they?"

"Oh, one was a Greek text—Homer. And the other looked like a commentary of some kind It was a new book Someone mugging up their classics. Now what have I said?"

Nigel's eyes were lit up with excitement. "Of course. I should have guessed it You didn't recognize the haversack, I suppose?"

"No. . . . They all look alike to me."

"It could have been Mr. Street's?"

"I dare say."

"Well, returning to your own Odyssey, when you reached port, you did not return to the ship at once."

"No."

"You saw a lot of the passengers embark then. Did any of them strike you as looking disturbed, behaving in a peculiar way?"

"No. But I wasn't taking much notice."

"Did Miss Ambrose look ill, or had she recovered?"

"I didn't see her."

"Whom did you see?"

"Oh, the Chalmerses. And Jeremy Street. And the Bishop and his wife Lots of people I don't know by name."

"Bentinck-Jones?"

"I don't remember him."

"Nikki?"

"Yes. He was there."

Nigel gazed non-committally at the boy "Why did you nearly miss the boat yourself?"

"Can't you guess?"

"You were waiting for Melissa?"

"Yes. I just wanted to make sure she—she was all right."

"And was she?"

"Well, of course. Oh, you mean her ankle? Yes, she came hobbling along So I was able to do something for her—you know, help her into the boat, and so forth."

A dreamy look came into Peter's eyes.

"But you didn't talk to her then, about what you'd seen?"

"Well, no. She was in pain. And one of the boatmen might have known some English. Actually, she didn't seem to want to talk, either "

"I'm most grateful to you, Peter." Nigel studied the boy's face, thin, lightly tanned, unformed as yet, sullen and defensive no longer. At this moment, the resemblance to Faith was very marked. Brother and sister shared, too, a certain wildness, recklessness of disposition, which in Peter's case was overlaid by the conventionality of school and class. Overlaid, but not buried Faith would go all out for what she wanted, with few inhibitions or qualms of conscience, whereas Peter's idealism, synthetic though it might be, would compel a more devious approach; he was probably capable of being no less ruthless, self-centered, ambitious than his sister, than a good many people of his age, but he would have to fake up moral sanctions for immoral actions. He was a more vulnerable character than Faith, Nigel judged, and one whom certain kinds of hurt could spoil for life.

"I'm afraid," Nigel went on, "you may be in for a pretty hard knock before long. Don't let it make you lose faith in—"

Nigel was interrupted by the sudden entry of Nikki, who burst out, before Nigel could stop him, with "They've found her body! Message just come through from Kalymnos. On the seashore, near—"

"Nikki! Pipe down! We have company."

But Peter Trubody was staring aghast at the cruise manager, his lips gone white. "Whose body?" he asked in a stony voice

"Why, Miss Ambrose's, of course Must have been washed ashore from the ship. Got a wound in the back of the head, they say."

"For *Christ's* sake will you hold your tongue!" Nigel furiously exclaimed.

Peter Trubody's nostrils were pinched; he threw back the lock of hair that fell over his eyes, which were drenched with misery and fear.

"All right," he said. "You win I killed her."

ELUCIDATION

Half an hour later, shortly after midday, the first officer's cabin held four people. Faith Trubody sat on the bed, chewing her nails and casting covert glances at Jeremy Street, who stood looking out of the window. Nikki was shuffling through a sheaf of papers he held in his hand. Ivor Bentinck-Jones leaned against the wall near Faith, addressing an occasional remark to the girl, who hardly bothered to answer.

"What on earth does this fellow Strangeways want us here for?" Jeremy asked Nikki.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Mr. Street."

"He might at least have the good manners not to keep us waiting."

"He's been acting like Lord God Almighty," said Ivor

"Who moves in a mysterious way his blunders to perform," Jeremy put in, with his supercilious smile. "Ah, here he is. And Mrs. Blaydon."

The door opened, the armed sailor outside saluted, and Nigel helped the limping woman into the cabin.

Bentinck-Jones hastened to offer the one available chair She inclined her head, its profile piquant in the Indian headscarf, and rather awkwardly sat down The four glanced at her and Nigel and one another with the uneasy neutrality of children at the start of a party.

"I've asked you here," said Nigel, "because each of you was involved, in one way or another, with the two victims of the murderer."

"Where's Peter? Why isn't Peter here?" Faith's voice was shrill.

"Peter is under close arrest. He has confessed to the crimes."

There was a dead silence, of incredulity and shock. Then Faith, whose face had gone so white that the freckles showed up like old, yellow bruise marks, cried out:

"It's a lie! I don't believe you! You never told me---"

"He has written a confession," Nigel cut in. Taking a paper from his pocket, he offered it to the girl who, without so much as glancing at it, tore it viciously into fragments.

"Here, steady on, young lady!" said Ivor.

"She's quite right," Nigel coolly remarked. "The confession is worthless."

Faith stared at him in amazement. "Then—then, why have you arrested him?"

"For his own safety. He is in danger from two people"

Jeremy Street shot a keen glance at Nigel. "You mean, there were *two* murderers?"

"No. Peter is in danger from the murderer, and from himself. He believes he knows who committed these crimes; a person he loved, as they say, not wisely but too well."

"Me?" Faith's voice was a whisper, as she stared at Nigel in horror.

"Peter is trying to protect this person. He might even kill himself in his present state of mind, to substantiate his confession."

"Well, he's a fool then," Faith harshly exclaimed. "I told him I didn't care a damn any longer about what Miss Ambrose had done. Mrs. Blaydon, why don't *you* say something?"

"Aren't we talking at cross-purposes? Mr. Strangeways has not said it was you your brother is trying to protect."

"Quite so. But Peter also knows too much for the murderer's peace of mind. That's the other reason why I've put him under guard."

"Look here, can't you stop talking in riddles and come to the point?" said Jeremy Street. "How do you know Peter's confession was worthless, anyway?"

"You, you—! Oh, how I despise you!" Faith was glaring at the lecturer like a Fury.

"I'll give you the gist of it You can judge for yourselves. Peter says he saw Miss Ambrose and her sister sunbathing in the cove yesterday afternoon, he was on the hillside above Presently Miss Ambrose started walking back to the harbor alone He ran down the hillside and interrupted her. It was only the second opportunity he'd had to talk to her alone, for she was nearly always with her sister—the first, by the way, was on Delos, when he was overheard threatening her."

"Threatening Ianthe?"

"Yes, Mrs. Blaydon. Peter says -it's quite different from the story he'd told me just before—that he interrupted Ianthe on the track, and they had a violent quarrel She again refused to admit any of the charges he made about her treatment of his sister at school—I won't go into these now—and she said some vile and contemptuous things about Peter and his feelings for you. It was this, Peter wrote in his confession, that proved the last straw Later, that evening, when he left the lounge to fetch something for his sister, he saw Ianthe walking along the promenade deck, forward He followed her out onto the fo'c's'le, stunned her with a blow on the jaw, and

threw her overboard. Then he noticed Primrose Chalmers watching him from the shadows, lost his head still more, strangled the child, and threw her into the swimming pool. It took only a few minutes, he says, to do this, to hurry down to the cabin, fetch his sister's stole, and return to the forward lounge. The whole thing," Nigel concluded, "leaks at every pore."

"I don't quite see that," Jeremy said.

Faith turned on him fiercely. "You wouldn't! As if Primrose would just stand watching, while Peter—"

"Exactly. But the revealing thing is the time and place of Peter's alleged crimes. He should have killed Miss Ambrose on the island, when they were quarreling and she was saying things that made him see red. If he didn't do it then, why should he do it later when he'd presumably have calmed down a bit?"

"Well, you tell us," Ivor unpleasantly remarked.

"I will." Nigel glanced around the cabin. Sitting on the bed, her legs curled beneath her, Faith Trubody was watching him fixedly, a feverish gleam in her green eyes. Jeremy Street leaned against the bulkhead on her right, jingling coins in the pocket of his royal-blue linen trousers, with the barely concealed impatience he evinced when pinned down after a lecture by some gushing member of his audience. Against the opposite wall stood Nikki, puzzled, silent, watchful; his mobile features had been responding like an actor's to each turn of the dialogue. Ivor Bentinck-Jones had plumped down on the far end of the bed from Faith; his arms were around his knees, and he regarded Nigel with the expression of a poker player ready to bluff or call a bluff.

His back to the door, Nigel glanced from one to another of them. "I certainly will," he said "The whole, desperate object of Peter's confession was to try and divert me from the truth—the truth that Miss Ambrose was not murdered on this ship."

There were a few seconds of bewildered silence, then they all broke out together:

"But that's impossible!"

"Not on the ship! I don't understand."

"You must be crazy, Mr. Strangeways."

"When was she murdered, then?"

"But, when you told me, I assumed—"

"Yes, Mrs Blaydon?" asked Nigel, looking at her meditatively.

"Well, that Ianthe's body had been washed ashore."

"That was what the murderer intended us to think." Nigel spoke to the four others now. "I had just been telling Mrs. Blaydon, before we came up

here, that a woman's body had been found on Kalymnos. The clothing and general appearance answer to the description of Miss Ambrose which we gave the authorities on Kalymnos. The body was wedged under a rock in the cove where she and her sister bathed yesterday afternoon. There was a wound on the back of her head. I'm sorry, Mrs. Blaydon, to go over all this again."

She had buried her face in her hands.

"It seems to me a quite inexcusable proceeding on your part," said Jeremy, throwing up his head and almost neighing the words. "I cannot conceive what possible object you have in—"

"You will, in due course."

Ivor Bentinck-Jones leaned forward, his face both weary and impudent. "And how does the great detective *know* the body was not washed ashore from the ship?"

"For one thing, she did not disappear till about 9:15 P.M. The ship left Kalymnos at six. By 9:15 we'd be some sixty miles from the island. Drowned bodies do not rise to the surface again for several days. It is almost impossible, the Captain tells me, that wind and current should drive a submerged body sixty miles between 9:15 P M , when we were notified of Miss Ambrose's disappearance, and 11·35 this morning, when her body was found."

"Oh, *almost* impossible?" said Ivor, looking around at the others for applause, as though he had scored a point.

"I'm very stupid, I wasn't awfully well last night, but I can't understand how my sister *could* have been killed anywhere else—I mean, she was on the ship, you've said so yourself, till 9:15."

"A woman, who was *taken* to be your sister, was seen for a short while at the lecture. It was pretty dark up there, though Identities can be mistaken. All people can be impersonated. Nikki has questioned the quartermaster who was receiving the landing tickets as the passengers re-embarked. The sailor was shown the passport photograph of Miss Ambrose, and he has no recollection of her returning to the ship."

"He could easily have missed her," protested Jeremy. "Have you checked the number of landing cards handed back?"

"Of course. The same number were returned as were handed out in the morning."

"Well, then."

"The person who murdered Miss Ambrose must have handed in two cards, one stuck to the other so that the sailor thought he was being given a single one."

"Have you any proof of this?" asked Ivor with a sneer.

"No."

Jeremy tossed up his head again. "You're simply wasting our time, with a lot of grotesque theories that—"

"I agree, it would save time if the murderer confessed." Nigel gazed hard at Jeremy Street. "Now, according to your story, Mrs. Blaydon—"

"I do hope you know what you're saying, Mr. Strangeways. But haven't you forgotten that I saw Ianthe before the lecture? I took her some fruit just after dinner I'm quite sure it was she, not someone impersonating her."

"We've only your word for it that she was in the cabin at all."

The familiar laugh came bubbling out. "But, my *dear* Mr. Strangeways, why should I say she was there if she wasn't?"

"You'd have to say it, if it was you who later impersonated Ianthe at the lecture."

Looking around at the others, she made a fluttering, helpless gesture I must be dreaming This is all absolutely mad."

"And after all," Nigel pursued, "who could impersonate your sister so successfully as yourself?"

"My dear sir," exclaimed Nikki, "there's no resemblance between them at all! How can you suggest it? A beautiful creature, a veritable naiad, and—"

"Miss Massinger is a sculptor The first time she saw Mrs. Blaydon and her sister, she commented on their likeness to each other—in bone structure, figure, and so on None of us has seen Mrs. Blaydon without her make-up. And the Bishop of Solway told me how alike the sisters were as small girls."

"This whole conversation seems to me quite unreal. I don't see why I should go on humoring your extraordinary fancies, Mr. Strangeways."

"You are perfectly at liberty to leave," Nigel answered.

The woman shrugged; then, in her deep, husky voice said, almost on a note of gaiety, "No, I think I'll stay. I can't resist the temptation to discover where this nonsense is leading."

She spoke for the others, too, whether or not she knew it; it was as though Nigel had presented them with a fantastic cocoon of paradox and unreality, and they must wait to see what emerged when he unwound it.

"What you seem to be implying, Mr. Strangeways, is that I murdered my sister."

Nigel said nothing, but watched her averted head.

"You're saying," she persisted, "that she was impersonated Obviously whoever impersonated her was the murderer—according to your theory."

"No. It's not 'obviously.' Let us suppose you impersonated her in order to protect somebody else, to give him—the murderer—an alibi."

"Who would the murderer be, then, that I'm supposed to have been protecting?" she asked, in the brisk, emotionless tone of a nurse humoring a lunatic.

"Oh, I can do that one," put in Bentinck-Jones. "If we're playing this as a parlor game, the answer is our respected savant, Mr. Jeremy Street."

"What the devil do you mean by that?" exclaimed Jeremy.

"You are the only one of us who has a perfect alibi for the time when Miss Ambrose was *supposed* to have committed suicide or been murdered You were lecturing," said Ivor, beaming at his companions.

Jeremy Street gave a contemptuous sniff. "This is becoming quite farcical. You seem to be leaving that wretched child out of account altogether—or are you going to tell us that Primrose as well as Miss Ambrose was killed on the island?"

"I'll come to her later," said Nigel. "Mr. Street, you told me that, when you went ashore again yesterday afternoon, you spent the whole time reading On a hillside west of the harbor. You never moved from the spot?"

"That is so."

"Peter Trubody found your books and your haversack there; but you were not in sight. So you did move from the spot."

Jeremy Street shook his head, like a horse tormented by flies. "Oh, I dare say I did get up for a minute or two—to stretch my legs"

"And it was not a detective novel you were reading"

"I fail to see what concern of yours my personal reading is."

"What *is* all this about?" said Faith Trubody. She was watching Jeremy's discomfiture with curiosity and a kind of covert glee.

"In a nutshell," said Nigel, "Mr. Street had a strong motive for killing Ianthe Ambrose he could have seen her, from where he sat, walking along the track—according to Mrs. Blaydon's statement, her sister started back toward the harbor, alone, at about 4.45. He could have run down the hill, intercepted her, struck her on the back of the head, and thrown the body into the sea The body might later have been washed ashore where it was found. Any comments, Mr. Street?"

"One doesn't comment on a tissue of falsehood, like—"

"Falsehood? Why did you tell me you were reading a detective novel, and that you never moved from the spot?"

"I did not kill Miss Ambrose." The lecturer's voice went a little high.

"I know you didn't. You are not the type to kill on the spur of the moment, and you could not have known beforehand that you would have

the opportunity yesterday afternoon. You had a different plan for Miss Ambrose, I suggest."

"This is pernicious nonsense."

"Connected with what you were reading on the hillside."

Jeremy Street gave him a furious look, and made for the door. The armed sailor outside stopped him, but at a sign from Nigel let him go.

Nigel had little doubt about the reason for Jeremy's evasions Earlier yesterday, Faith had refused the man's offer of marriage. This blow to his vanity, together with the blackmailing attempt of Bentinck-Jones, had determined him to get his own back on Ianthe, the original source of his troubles. He would make sure that, this time, Ianthe should not humiliate him during a lecture, more than this, he might turn the tables on her. No doubt he had been mugging up the text and consulting the new commentary which Peter had seen, with the view of laying some trap into which Ianthe could be drawn, if and when she took the offensive at the lecture A practiced lecturer can nearly always make a questioner from the audience look foolish. To humiliate Ianthe in public would be a great satisfaction in itself; to vindicate his own scholarship against Ianthe's would also re-establish his status with Mr. Trubody, whose financial backing Jeremy needed. The whole plan was, of course, childish, petty, undignified—but just the sort of thing a vain exhibitionist like Jeremy would find appealing, and would hate to have exposed. Hence Jeremy's discomposure when Nigel first asked him what he had been reading, and the lie about a detective novel, as for his saying he never left the spot, it was probable that Jeremy Street had genuinely forgotten he had done so.

Nigel had no wish for Street to be further humiliated. Brushing aside a rather avid question from Faith, he said, "There is no link between Street and Mrs. Blaydon, therefore no reason why she should have impersonated her sister to protect him."

The woman at the table sighed wearily "I do wish you would get this idea out of your head."

"You must bear with me a little longer" Nigel gave her a veiled look, then addressed the others as if she were not there. "On the theory that it was Mrs. Blaydon who did the impersonation, it might have been as a willing accessory or an unwilling one. Which brings us to you, Nikki."

The cruise manager started convulsively *"Me?* Have you gone crackers?" He threw away the toothpick he had been at work with, and took two steps toward Nigel.

"Your alibi for yesterday afternoon—"

"Now take it easy, Mr. Strangeways, take it easy! That was confidential. You know? Top secret."

"Will the person you were with confirm your alibi? And how would I know it was not a put-up job between you both?"

"But say, I thought you believed me!"

"Will the Athens police believe you? It could look bad for you. You are known to have told Mrs. Blaydon privately about a special bathing place. You tell none of the other passengers. It sounds like an assignation, doesn't it? You go along there—Miss Massinger and I saw you creeping off in a highly furtive way. But, when you arrive, you find Miss Ambrose there too. There's a quarrel. Miss Ambrose insults you You see red and hit her—a little too hard. The body has to be disposed of. Wedge it under a rock; it's likely that Miss Ambrose was murdered where her body has been found. You and Mrs. Blaydon then make a plan, to create the illusion that her sister was killed, or committed suicide, on the ship. You're in a better position than anyone to fiddle the landing tickets. Your liaison with Mrs. Blaydon—"

"Please! I find this absolutely indecent."

"You are quite at liberty to go, Mrs. Blaydon," said Nigel, for the second time

"Are you suggesting that I—I became an accomplice in my sister's murder, because of an—an attachment to this man?"

"The fun gets fast and furious," said Ivor with a malicious chuckle.

"Hold your tongue, you goddam heel!" shouted Nikki.

"It's a line the police might work on," said Nigel coolly. "We must have all noticed how attentive and solicitous Mrs Blaydon was toward her sister Which makes it all the odder that she should have allowed her to walk back alone to the harbor after an attack of sunstroke."

"I did explain that to you. You've no idea how obstinate poor Ianthe could be."

"I must admit," said Nigel, "I cannot see Mrs Blaydon *willingly* cooperating with her sister's murderer."

"Not for a man she'd fallen for?" Ivor outrageously asked. "The way these two carried on in public—"

"We know you are a keen student of human behavior," said Nigel, raising his voice to quell the outbreak which Bentinck-Jones's remark produced. "And we know why If Mrs. Blaydon was an *un*willing accessory, we don't have to look far for the murderer."

"This time, there are witnesses to what you're saying. Defamation of character is actionable. Watch your step."

"Well, I'll say it," cried Faith Trubody "I don't care a damn. You tried to blackmail Jeremy You're a blackmailer, you fat little reptile. You blackmailed Mrs. Blaydon into impersonating her sister. Isn't that what you mean, Mr. Strangeways?"

"Any comments?" asked Nigel, looking fixedly at Ivor.

"My solicitor will make all the comments that are necessary."

"I really wouldn't start invoking the law, if I were you. Mrs. Blaydon, what hold did this man have on you?"

"None. I keep telling you, you're under a ridiculous misconception—it's absurd, mad."

"Are you a heavy sleeper, may I ask?"

"I really can't see—yes, I am rather."

"You told me you slept for a while yesterday afternoon in the cove. When you woke up, you found your sister was looking ill. Are you sure she was alive?"

"Of course she was alive." The beautiful eyes opened wide. "Oh, you're thinking Mr. Bentinck-Jones might have killed her while I was asleep, crept up and stunned her from behind before she could cry out and wake me?"

"Peter Trubody told me he'd seen you both from the hillside and had thought your sister was dead."

"Oh, I know. Silly boy. I explained it to him at the dance. Poor Ianthe had fainted, and I clumsily let her head fall back on the rock But it wasn't a serious knock she got—not enough to cause a wound—oh, I see, you're wondering if it was an accident and I lost my head and told lies about it" The woman, who had talked till now in a slow, almost dragging way, as if still exhausted, brought out these last words with a rush.

"It's a pity," said Nigel. "For, as far as I can see, Bentinck-Jones had an extremely strong motive for murdering Primrose Chalmers."

"Oh, it's Primrose now, is it?" said Ivor.

"Yes If one thing in this case is clear, it's that the murderer believed Primrose had seen the murder being done."

"B but, you said it was *not* done on the ship," stammered Nikki.

"It wasn't. Primrose was spying on Miss Ambrose while she was sunbathing in the cove She wrote down in her notebook what she'd seen. When her body was found, the notebook was not in her sporran, where she always kept it, nor in her cabin Bentinck-Jones finally admitted to me that he'd stolen the notebook—off the body, he said. The ink had run, he said, and was indecipherable. Only the last entry, written in pencil, was legible"

"But I told you," Ivor broke in, mopping his brow. "I told you what she'd written. It was nothing to do with seeing Miss Ambrose murdered"

"You told me, under strong pressure. But how do I know you told me the truth? You admitted you had taken the notebook. You led us to assume you'd taken it off the child's body. Very clever. But suppose you'd taken it from her while she was alive, and found she'd been an eyewitness of what you did on the island You had the notebook, but the knowledge was still in the child's head. So she had to be silenced for good and all. Naturally, when I questioned you this morning, you'd make up a false version of what she wrote."

"You bloody double-crosser!" Ivor muttered, hunched up, glaring at Nigel.

"Why should anyone murder the child except to suppress evidence? Who knew that this evidence existed, in her notebook, except you? You're properly dished, aren't you?"

"And don't forget," Faith broke in excitedly, "I saw him following Primrose out toward the swimming pool last night."

"And another witness saw Primrose, just before, moving in the same direction with a woman the witness took to be Ianthe Ambrose. I must ask you again, Mrs. Blaydon, did this man have some hold on you and force you to pose as your sister?"

She trailed a languid hand across her brow. "And I must tell you again, he didn't."

"Very well," said Nigel after a pause. "We'll drop the idea of forced collusion on your part. But I'm afraid this will open up a still less inviting prospect. Let us assume for the moment that Bentinck-Jones did not kill Miss Ambrose, and that his account of what Primrose wrote in her notebook was true."

Nigel moved over to the door, cast a glance around the four in the cabin, and took a sheet of paper from his pocket. The cabin had grown unpleasantly warm; there was a prickle of sweat on Faith's forehead, at the roots of her blond hair, and Ivor was mopping his face again. Nikki's dark skin gleamed, like polished wood. The three of them looked all at sea, like survivors in an open boat drifting without sails or oars, whither they knew not and were past caring.

Nigel opened the sheet of paper. "This is what Primrose saw. A wicker case floating out from under the rocks, and the arm and head of a swimmer retrieving it" He paused The silence protracted itself. Then Faith exclaimed, "What is it, Mrs Blaydon? Are you feeling—?"

"Is that *all* she saw?"

"Absolutely all, Mrs Blaydon," said Nigel.

She was sitting in a curiously rigid pose; then she gave herself a sort of angry shake "Well then, what's all the fuss about?"

"Primrose thought the person she saw swimming was Ianthe. The swimmer had a dark head—looked like a seal, she says—and was not wearing a bathing cap Mrs. Blaydon always wore a yellow one. But Ianthe had always said she couldn't swim. Primrose had it in for Ianthe, and believed she'd caught her out lying. Mrs. Blaydon, you never told me about the wicker case floating away."

"My good man, one can't always remember everything," the woman replied, with an edge on her voice.

"When did this happen?"

"Just before Ianthe fainted. As I told you, I tried to get her into some shade. In doing so, I accidentally kicked the case off a rock into the water."

"Then she fainted?"

"Yes."

"But, instead of reviving her, you swam out to retrieve the case?"

"I retrieved it in order to revive her. There was a bottle of smelling salts in it."

"I see."

"And I was in such a hurry that I did not put on my bathing cap Does that set your mind at ease?"

Nigel studied the sheet of paper again. "Primrose was almost certain the swimmer had been Ianthe She went off and made a plan to confirm it. This plan was the cause of her death; I'll come back to it presently First, let me reconstruct the murder in the cove" Nigel was now addressing the other three again, as if the fourth person were not present. "Mrs. Blaydon stuns her sister with a heavy stone—"

"Say! You're crazy!" Nikki expostulated. "On the beach there, where anyone might have seen her?"

"She and her sister had been there for an hour or two—long enough to discover what a deserted place it is The only people who turned up were the Chalmerses, whom Ianthe got rid of double-quick, very conveniently for her sister They were at the water's edge, screened from the track on one side by a steep overhang and by boulders."

"But anyone approaching from the eastward side could have seen them," said Nikki. "You come around a jutting bit of hillside, along the track from the harbor, and you look straight across the cove—"

"You seem to know it very well, Nikki."

The cruise manager gave Nigel an angry look, and took refuge in silence.

"The fact is that, on that stony track, people couldn't walk silently. You'd

hear footsteps before they came around the escarpment Sound travels far in the Greek air. As I was saying, Mrs. Blaydon stuns her sister; then she drags her into the water and wedges the body under a rock. It was all over in a minute. She could not know that Peter Trubody was watching from the hillside."

Faith Trubody's breath came out in a hiss.

"Peter saw Ianthe, stretched out on a rock at the water's edge. He saw Mrs. Blaydon, naked except for the bathing cap, lift her sister's head and let it drop back with a crack onto the rock. Mrs. Blaydon had just struck her and was making sure she was unconscious. Peter got the impression Ianthe was dead—she was, all but. This gave him a terrible shock, and he ran away without looking behind him. He got this shock because though he'd not seen it happening, some instinct told him that Mrs. Blaydon was responsible for Ianthe's death. He could not bear to stay a moment longer. Had he done so, he would have observed Mrs. Blaydon pull her sister's body into the water and wedge it under a rock, where nobody passing along the track could see it. In doing this, her bathing cap got pulled off. When she came out of the water, she noticed that her dress and the wicker case had fallen in. The latter was floating away. She dived in, without putting on her cap again, because it was vital to her plan that the case should not be lost. In the case was Ianthe's landing card."

The woman's eyes, perplexed now and troubled, met Nigel's again.

"You mustn't say these horrible things. It's frightening"

"Having disposed of the body, retrieved the case and the wet dress, Mrs. Blaydon put on her bathrobe and moved around to the other side of the cove, where she could dry her dress in the sun. Mr. Chalmers found her there half an hour or so later. He told me, by the way, that 'her bathing things and dress were *spread out to dry* on the rocks'—an interesting, unconscious assumption, for he could hardly have seen, from the track above, that the dress was wet. In spite of Mr. Chalmers warning her that it was getting late, Mrs Blaydon still nearly missed the ship Didn't you?"

"I hurt my ankle. That's what made me late."

"Mrs. Blaydon *had* to be as late as possible. If she arrived on board at the very last minute, there was every chance that, in the general bustle and sensation of her arrival, she'd be able to palm Ianthe's landing ticket together with her own onto the quarter-master. She succeeded. There would now be evidence that Ianthe had returned to the ship And it was most important there should be; otherwise, if the rest of Mrs. Blaydon's plan went wrong, the investigation would discover that no one in fact had seen

Ianthe walking back along the track, or at the quayside, or returning to the *Menelaos.*"

Nigel was certainly gripping his audience now. It was as though they felt that, after turning them down several blind alleys, he was now leading them along an open road. Like a jury returning to give a verdict of Guilty, they kept their eyes averted from the woman in the dock. Nikki seemed on the point of expostulating, but so much out of his depth that he could not do so. Bentinck-Jones had relaxed, and was eying Nigel with an expression half skeptical, half respectful. Faith Trubody, who had been seized by a fit of nervous yawning, fidgeted, bit her nails, ran her fingers through her blond hair. As for the woman Nigel was accusing now, the deepening anxiety in her eyes and the tense pose of her body showed the strain under which she labored. There was a loud bellow from the *Menelaos'* steam whistle, and she visibly flinched.

"Are we coming in?" Faith gave a nervous laugh. "We must be nearly there."

Nigel resumed, speaking faster. "Mrs. Blaydon is seen at dinner, alone. She tells us she's taking some fruit to Ianthe in the cabin, and Ianthe is feeling better and will attend the lecture. After dinner, Mrs. Blaydon is at the bar for a little, then retires 'to dress for the dance.' She goes to her cabin, removes her make-up, puts on her sister's clothes. Remember, no one saw the two sisters *together* after they'd been seen in the cove. Posing as Ianthe, Mrs. Blaydon goes to the lecture; she behaves in such a way—sighing heavily and muttering to herself—that afterward people would accept Ianthe's disappearance as suicide Ianthe, we were meant to think, threw herself off the ship. With any luck at all, the body would not be discovered in the cove for several days at least—long enough to sustain the idea that it had been driven back to the island by current and wind. But it was at this point that Primrose Chalmers' plan cut across the murderer's.

"Primrose got up, when 'Ianthe' left the lecture, followed her down to the promenade deck, caught up with her, and, according to one eyewitness, took hold of her sleeve, spoke to her, wouldn't let go. 'Miss Ambrose,' this witness told us, 'went stiff and tried to pull her arm away as though she wanted to go down to her cabin ' She did, of course—very badly, one sister must disappear now, and the other return to her own identity. But Primrose said something to 'Ianthe' which made her change her mind. There can be little doubt what it was: Primrose hinted that she had seen something peculiar in the cove that afternoon.

"All Primrose wanted, of course, was to confirm her belief that Ianthe had been lying when she said she couldn't swim. She took the woman she

believed to be Ianthe out onto the fo'c's'le, under the pretext of requiring privacy, maneuvered her to the swimming pool, and pushed her in."

"I happened at that moment to be at an open window in the saloon. I heard a faint cry and a splash. Then, seconds later, the sounds were repeated. This is what happened—Primrose stayed on the edge of the pool, to see if the woman could swim. She could. She swam a few strokes, seized the child's ankles, dragged her in, and strangled her. We don't know just what Primrose had said to her on the way to the pool; but it was enough to convince her—quite mistakenly, as it happened—that the child had witnessed the murder in the cove.

"Another witness saw a woman she took to be Miss Ambrose hurrying down toward her cabin, with a rug draped over her head. The murderer had snatched it up from a deck chair on the way back from the pool, to conceal her dripping hair and clothes. It is now just before 9:15—five minutes since 'Ianthe' left the lecture."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Ivor. "Surely someone would have noticed a trail of moisture on the stairway or the corridor?"

"Not necessarily. The carpeting is a dark color. You yourself were too busy spying on Nikki to notice the carpeting; Nikki had his mind on the assignation, and then on the unexpected reception he had got. Other passengers *might* have noticed. But they'd not see anything unusual in it—people are constantly running from the swimming pool or the showers to their cabins, still wet. Well, then. Nikki enters Mrs. Blaydon's cabin. I won't go into this in detail; but he finds a woman there, naked, her body wet, her hair soaking. She has just had time to tear off her wet clothes. Mrs. Blaydon has tried to explain this by saying she'd taken a shower before dressing for the dance. I am asked to believe that a woman of fashion, a woman who always wore a bathing cap in the sea, would go under a shower just before a dance without any covering for her hair.

"After Nikki leaves her cabin, she dresses and puts on her make-up again, to appear at the dance, as Melissa, some twenty minutes later. It was a quick change. She did not have time to dry her hair properly, so she sprayed it with oil—Peter Trubody commented on this during the dance—to account for its looking wet. One must admire the attention to detail, at such a nerve-racking—"

"Stop! This is insane! I've just thought of something. It proves I didn't—couldn't impersonate Ianthe. My ankle *She* wasn't limping when she was seen at the lecture, was she? or on the deck afterward? I'd hurt my ankle. I couldn't possibly have walked without a limp. Could I?"

"Sure, sure!" Nikki excitedly spoke. "I guess that proves the lady is innocent."

Nigel gazed meditatively at her face, anxious and distorted beneath the heavy make-up. "I'm afraid not. Miss Ambrose had a rather ungainly way of walking. Mrs. Blaydon's ankle was not badly sprained, only a bit swollen She could walk on it, given a little resolution, so as not to betray a limp. She could even have turned her ankle deliberately, in order to give the effect of Ianthe's awkward gait."

Nikki's face was crestfallen. Faith chewed her nails. Ivor had the gloating look of one who has witnessed a murderous counterpunch in the boxing ring.

"No," said Nigel slowly, "that one won't wash. There's a far better reason why Mrs. Blaydon could not have murdered her sister."

"Well, for God's sake!" exclaimed Ivor.

"She *didn't?*" Faith said, on a rush of pent-up breath.

"The theory I have outlined to you," went on Nigel impassively, "is a very attractive one. In fact, it had been in my mind from early on, and each new fact I discovered could be fitted into it It covers all the facts, but one."

"Yes?" The woman in the chair breathed it rather than spoke it.

"Mrs. Blaydon had no possible, conceivable *motive* for murdering her sister."

"How do you know?" snarled Bentinck-Jones

"You say she is innocent?" Nikki asked, in an ominously quiet voice.

"Mrs. Blaydon is innocent."

"Well, then," said Faith indignantly, "why all this—this rigmarole, like the end of a corny detective novel?"

"I rather agree, Faith, you've—er 'said it,' " murmured the husky voice, wryly stressing the colloquialism.

"Yes, Goddammit, why did we have to have this circus?—torturing her, making us all think—"

"I thought you knew Mrs. Blaydon," Nigel cut in harshly.

"Knew her?" Nikki looked stupid, stunned

"Well enough to know she wasn't the kind of woman who'd kill anyone "

"Oh, so that's it," Bentinck-Jones sneered. "She didn't murder because she's not a murdering type God preserve us from amateur detectives!"

Nigel ignored him. After one glance at the drooping shoulders, the relaxed, exhausted pose, of the woman in the chair, who had closed her eyes and was smiling faintly at last, he turned away.

"And now we come to Miss Trubody. We have not yet dealt with her."

"Me?" The girl jerked upright, as if every nerve in her body had suddenly

been alerted. The bridge telegraph clanged twice Through the window the heads of ship cranes could be seen, stalking slowly past. The engines of the *Menelaos* thumped as the screws were reversed.

"Me?" cried Faith, white-faced, her thin body tensed.

"Mrs. Blaydon," said Nigel, "I'm afraid this has been an ordeal for you I'll spare you the rest Nikki, will you take her to her cabin, please?"

The woman rose, glanced at the others with unseeing eyes, smiled uncertainly at no one in particular, and with Nikki's hand under her elbow limped toward the door. She was within a yard of it when, in a quiet, conversational tone, Faith Trubody said,

"Oh, Brossy. Could you—"

The woman stopped, swung around involuntarily, and it was, unmistakably, the movement of a schoolmistress who, at the blackboard, hears from behind her some noise of mischief or impertinence, some whisper or rustle or giggle, and swings around to quell it She knew at once she had betrayed herself—before any of the others but Nigel realized it. The exquisitely, heavily made-up face altered before their eyes, working, distorting itself, shifting, coarsening, the mask of Melissa shaling away as when a landslide slowly erases the features of a cliff, and Ianthe Ambrose's face, Ianthe's personality were unbared from beneath. The make-up was still there, but it could no longer hold together the fiction that this was Melissa Blaydon.

They all perceived it now. Ianthe could see her self-betrayal in their eyes. She did not even try to bluff it out. Instinct took over—the blind, furious instinct for self-preservation. She had the door open, shaking off Nikki's hand The armed sailor outside barred her way, and she clawed at his face so that he reeled back, blood starting from a furrow under his eye. She ran to the rail, saw concrete quayside, not yielding water, far beneath; darted away aft, down the ladder to the boat deck, across the deck to the starboard side, but the rail here was lined with passengers, who turned like sheep when they heard Nikki's shouts of "Stop her! Stop that woman!" But, before they had assembled their wits, Ianthe was down on the promenade deck, moving aft again, with that crippled, scurrying, lurching gait, the headscarf streaming out behind her.

From the boat deck aft, Nikki hailed a group of sailors on the poop deck below. Four of them began to run forward, two on either side of the ship. Ianthe saw them coming, as she reached the engine-room hatch. The hatch was open. Thirty feet below, the turbines, bedded in the ship's floor, gleamed with oily sweat. Ianthe Ambrose had scuffled herself over the combing of the hatch before the sailors could reach her or any of the passengers crowded along the rail had realized what was amiss She fell

headfirst among the turbines, a long scream trailing behind her. The yellow scarf came fluttering to rest over her shattered head.

II

"So you thought I was carrying on like a corny detective novel?" said Nigel, gazing at Faith Trubody with mock severity.

The girl wriggled in her deck chair. "Well, all that phony business of pinning the crime on each suspect in turn—you know—in the last chapter. I must say, though, when you turned on me at the end I nearly jumped out of my skin. I thought for a second I must be the murderer, instead of remembering it was my entrance cue" She turned to her brother. "Mr. Strangeways told me, before the meeting, that at some point he'd say, 'and now we come to Miss Trubody'; that was to be the signal. Then, just as Mrs. Blaydon was going out, I had to say something to her bringing in Miss Ambrose's nickname—I mean, I still thought it was Mrs. Blaydon. That's how we caught her out."

"Don't gloat, twin," said Peter repressively.

"I'm not gloating. And anyway, she deserved everything she got."

"Oh, you young creatures and your facile moral judgments!" Clare lazily drawled. "I suppose it was one of your nerve wars, Nigel"

"You suppose right. She might still have got away with it, even then. That's why I faked up a case against each of the others, and then came to the case against Melissa Blaydon, which was the strongest of all. I had to keep Ianthe on tenterhooks and gradually screw up the tension, hoping that when it was suddenly relaxed she'd be off her guard for a minute and give herself away."

"It must have been hell for her, after taking us in that she was Melissa, to find that you could prove Melissa guilty," said Faith.

"Yes. Particularly when I was reconstructing, with almost every detail correct, how *Ianthe* had in fact committed the crimes"

"A sort of mirror image, you mean?" said Clare. "Ianthe had killed Melissa and Primrose, and was successfully impersonating her sister, and now she found you apparently had a watertight case against Melissa for killing Primrose and Ianthe? She couldn't extricate herself from the toils, except by admitting she was Ianthe, which would be as good as confessing that she'd murdered Melissa. Very awkward for her."

"As I say, she might have got away with it if she'd just sat tight. But the

sudden relaxing of tension when I said Melissa was innocent—that was too much for her."

"I can't understand why she stayed on in the cabin—when you were accusing everyone in turn," said Faith. "Surely she'd be afraid of saying something that gave her away."

"She didn't dare leave. You remember, I told her twice she was at liberty to go. If she'd been innocent, she'd have left. But she had to know just how much I knew, or guessed, of the truth. And she kept her nerve remarkably well. It wasn't till I suddenly relaxed the tension that she gave herself away —twice."

"Twice?" asked Faith.

"Yes, after you addressed her as 'Brossy,' of course—but, before that, when you upbraided me for behaving like a corny detective novel, she said —do you remember?—'I rather agree, Faith; you've—er—said it.' She put the colloquialism in quotes, as a rather pedantic schoolmistress would when talking to a pupil. Melissa would never have used a slang expression self-consciously like that."

The four were sitting on the boat deck of the *Menelaos*, which was steaming eastward again. The formalities at Athens had taken little more than twenty-four hours, thanks mainly to the long statement made by Nigel to the police authorities; he would have to return later, when the results of the autopsy on Primrose Chalmers were known and the body of Melissa Blaydon had been conveyed from Kalymnos to Athens. Legal identification of the two sisters' bodies could only be proved when reports from their dentists came to hand; but the authorities had no doubt that Nigel's solution of the mystery was broadly correct. So the *Menelaos*, after oiling, was allowed to resume her cruise Nearly all the passengers remained in her, though Ivor Bentinck-Jones had seen fit to leave the ship at Athens, and Jeremy Street had informed Nikki that he did not propose to stay in her a day longer than his contract bound him to.

"When did you first suspect it was Ianthe?" Peter Trubody now asked. There were dark rings under his eyes, and he presented a very much subdued appearance: he had done a lot of growing up during the last few days —enough to anticipate what was in Nigel's mind, for he added soberly, "You needn't mind—I shan't burst into tears or anything. It was only while I thought Melissa must have done it—" He broke off, his lip trembling a little.

"First suspected Ianthe? Well, it didn't come in a blaze of light, you know. I fancied it was Melissa for a while. It had to be her or Ianthe, once the facts all pointed toward the murder having been committed on

Kalymnos. But Melissa had no conceivable motive, whereas Ianthe had two immensely strong ones."

"No, I mean the impersonation."

"Oh, it would be so much easier for Ianthe to pose as Melissa than vice versa," Clare put in.

"Exactly We all knew what Ianthe looked like—we'd seen her face, always without make-up. None of us knew what Melissa looked like without it. Ianthe could make up to disguise herself as Melissa. If Melissa had been impersonating Ianthe, at the lecture on the boat deck, she'd have had to remove her make-up and the difference between their naked faces would be noticeable."

"But Ianthe couldn't have gone on the rest of her life posing as Melissa," said Peter. "She'd be bound to be shown up I don't see what she expected to gain out of—out of the damnable things she did."

"That's just where you're wrong But I'd better tell you her motives first, then what she planned to do, and then how it worked out in practice."

Nigel recounted what the Bishop of Solway had told him about the sisters' childhood—how Melissa had always been the favored one and their father could never show Ianthe true affection.

"Then Melissa married a rich man, who left her all his money when he died. Ianthe, though a brilliant scholar, was a failure as a schoolmistress, she'd recently been sacked, and might well fail to get another job Also, she was a man-hater—or at least ill at ease with men—so she had little prospect of marriage From childhood, she'd had good reason to envy her sister, to be jealous of her, to be poisoned with resentment and hatred"

"But Melissa would have given her money, supported her; she was immensely generous," Peter protested.

"I've no doubt she would. But imagine Ianthe forced to accept it—from Melissa of all people! Her pride and rancor simply wouldn't have tolerated charity from that source. Then she had this nervous breakdown. It crystallized all her resentment of her sister."

"Was she mad?" asked Faith. "She must have been."

"I don't think so. But the breakdown set her feet on the path toward murder Melissa, whom she had not met for years, was cabled for. Melissa felt some guilt at having neglected her sister for so long; this cruise was part of her reparation. The two women had eyes of the same color and were of the same height and build. Ianthe would have seen Melissa without make-up, and realized that their faces were still very much alike, as they had been —so the Bishop told me—in childhood. He also told me that Ianthe had been a first-rate mimic then. I imagine the possibility of impersonating her

sister entered Ianthe's mind first, in quite a vague way; then it spawned the idea of murdering her."

"But I just don't see it," Peter said "How could she hope to pass herself off as Melissa for the rest of her life?"

"You must remember that Melissa was a rolling stone. After her husband died, she moved from place to place abroad, never staying anywhere long. All Ianthe would have to do would be to avoid the places where her restless sister had lived—and, of course, keep out of the way of Melissa's ex-lovers."

"Quite a job, that," Faith remarked.

"Oh, shut up!" said Peter. "Don't be so foul!"

Clare said, "But what about the money?"

"Melissa had no children. We shall find, probably, that she'd left all her money to Ianthe. But Ianthe was quite clever enough to realize that, if Melissa died by violence, she herself would be the first suspect, being sole heir. So she planned to—"

"No, I mean how would Ianthe, posing as Melissa, be able to get hold of the money?" asked Clare.

"Oh, easy. Typewritten letters to the brokers or solicitors or bank manager or whoever it might be; Melissa's signature forged; her account to be transferred to such-and-such a bank. But, mind you, she had been studying the part of Melissa very carefully. Melissa told me, on Delos, that, although Ianthe had previously shown no interest in her life for years, she had recently spent hours asking about her marriage, her travels, her friends, and so on. Ianthe was briefing herself, just in case she should run into someone who had known her sister."

"Ah, and that's why Ianthe did the watchdog act during the cruise," said Clare.

"Yes. We all noticed how she clung to Melissa. She could not risk anyone being alone with her sister for long, lest things might be said in conversation which Ianthe wouldn't know about when the time came for her to play the part of Melissa. And there was always a danger that Melissa would tell somebody that her sister had learned to swim when she was a child We put it down to possessiveness on Ianthe's part. But, as Melissa told me, Ianthe had always been an independent, unclinging type before. One can imagine her jumping at the idea of a cruise; for with any luck no intimate of Melissa or herself would be on board, and if it became necessary to identify her sister's body, she'd be the only person competent to do so."

"It was all premeditated, then?"

"Very much so. Mind you, I fancy the outline of the crime appeared to her first as a fantasy—the way it does to intellectuals; she toyed with it,

elaborated it, brooded over it, until she was possessed by it. No doubt, before they came to Greece, she'd been secretly practicing Melissa's signature, her style of make-up, her vocal intonations, and so on. And she must have decided early on that the method of murder should be drowning; from the start of the cruise she let it be known that she couldn't swim—a non-swimmer would not be suspected of drowning the victim. Whether the limp was originally part of the scheme or a brilliant last-minute improvisation, I don't know."

"But surely," said Peter, "it was an accident? Hurrying along that rough track to catch the steamer—"

"Oh no. It was absolutely necessary to the impersonation. Just to think."

"Necessary? I don't see it."

Clare said, "I think I do. She could mimic Melissa's voice, and make-up to look exactly like her—I suppose, by the way, she got herself the same hair-do as Melissa before they left England But Melissa was a graceful woman, and Ianthe had a rather ungainly gait—"

"Exactly! The thing most likely to give you away, if you are trying to disguise yourself, is your walk. But Melissa limping would look no different from Ianthe limping That's why I got so inquisitive about the turned ankle. It wasn't a fake. She did it quite deliberately."

"I think it's horrible," Faith exclaimed. "All the time she was sitting about on deck chairs, huddled up like a—like a basilisk, she was plotting how to do this dreadful thing."

"Yes. She was waiting for the right time and place, learning the layout of the ship, and above all presenting a picture of a woman imperfectly recovered from a nervous breakdown, ripe for suicide. I'll come back to that presently. Two things, though, she could not have foreseen—that you would be on board, Faith, and that Clare and I would You and Peter were a great nuisance to her with your persecution campaign—"

"I'm sorry about that Aqua-Lung business," said Peter shamefacedly "It was rather a silly trick, I suppose."

"Actually, I put him up to it," Faith confessed.

"You did, did you?" said Clare a little tartly "Children, I was always told, shouldn't play with fire."

"I hated her. If only you knew how foully she behaved to me at school!"

"Oh, forget it, Faith!" Peter said. "It's over and done with. You talk as if she'd ruined you for life."

"Then there was Clare, with her trained eye, who saw the skull beneath the skin—the close similarity of bone structure. And there was me, with my

trained mind and my professional inquisitiveness. Ianthe made one frightful gaffe, when she picked me to practice on."

"Practice on? What do you mean?"

"Clare and I were promenading the deck one night, and she called out to us, using Melissa's voice. We both thought it was Melissa, till we went up to her. I remembered that later. Well, the cove at Kalymnos gave Ianthe the chance she had been waiting for. She was a very clever woman, you realize, as well as a ruthless one. Her general scheme wasn't nearly so reckless as you might think. She would drown Melissa, change clothes with her, return alone to the ship as Melissa, hand in both landing cards together, say her sister had felt poorly and returned before her; after dinner, she would go to the cabin, remove make-up, put on her own clothes, attend the lecture, give an impression of acute melancholia, leave the lecture early, return to the cabin, and finally emerge as Melissa again. The disappearance of 'Ianthe' would be accepted quite naturally as suicide. If the body were found at all; it would not be found, in that unfrequented cove, for days or weeks, and the authorities would assume she had drifted back to the island after throwing herself off the ship. If the body were to be discovered before the cruise was over, Ianthe, posing as Melissa, was the person the authorities would send for to identify it. There was little likelihood of an investigation, under the circumstances. If the body were not discovered for some time, it would be unrecognizable anyway. But Ianthe had still worried about the possibility of distinguishing marks being noticed on Melissa's body She tried to prevent her sister sunbathing in public. On the beach at Patmos she ticked Melissa off for not putting on a bathrobe over her bikini, I thought at the time it was just Ianthe's prudishness. Oh yes, and it was on this beach that I observed for the first time what Melissa kept in that wicker case she carried about everywhere."

"Her landing ticket, you mean?" asked Faith.

"Yes But something else—her make-up materials. You see the point?"

"Well, no, I don't think I do."

"The dawn will come. Well, there we have Ianthe's outline plan. She would kill Melissa, become Melissa, and live on Melissa's income, happy forever after. And then the two sisters went to that desolate cove on Kalymnos, and Ianthe had the time, the place, and the unloved one, all together We now come," said Nigel with a questioning glance at Peter, "to a pretty grim passage."

"It's all right. I can—I want to know," said Peter; but his lips had gone white.

"After Ianthe had got rid of the Chalmerses, both the sisters sunbathed.

Posing as Melissa, Ianthe told me that she had gone to sleep for a bit. The real Melissa probably did—face down, on that flat rock, with little or nothing on Ianthe, I suspect, had taken off all her own clothes; we know she'd been sunbathing a lot the last few days, to get her skin, which was sallow anyway, the color of Melissa's; also, the *Menelaos* passengers being on the whole a gentlemanly and ladylike lot, if anyone did turn up they'd probably avert their eyes from two naked females. Well, Melissa is lying face down, asleep. Ianthe hits her a violent blow on the back of the head, stunning her. Melissa's dress is lying nearby, and gets some blood on it; that's my theory, anyway; Ianthe had to plunge it in the sea presently, to wash off the bloodstains But first she begins to put her own clothes on Melissa's body. While she's doing this, she notices that the wicker case had got dislodged and is floating out to sea. She at once plunges in after it."

"Because Melissa's make-up was in it, and Ianthe had none of her own there?" said Clare.

"I think so. If she couldn't make up there and then, her whole plan would be wrecked Well, Primrose saw a swimmer retrieving the case, and thought it must be Ianthe because she was not wearing the yellow bathing cap that Melissa always wore. When Ianthe scrambled ashore again, she put on Melissa's bathing cap and finished dressing the body. That was what she was doing when Peter saw her. She'd lifted the body up a bit to slip her jumper over the head, and she let the head fall back with a crack onto the rock."

"Just as if it was—was a dummy in a shop window," Peter muttered "Oh God!"

"Yes She was not one to respect the dead. And she had the devil's own luck. If Peter hadn't removed himself at this point, he'd have seen her drag the unconscious woman into the sea, and wedge her under that overhanging rock to drown. Then Ianthe washed the bloodstained dress and made up her face Presently she moved to the other side of the cove, so that she could dry the dress in the sun. Ianthe, as Melissa, returns to the ship. All goes well for a while But then Primrose and Nikki between them contrive to complicate what had been a simple undertaking"

"Nikki? How?" asked Peter, with an undertone of jealousy in his voice.

"In a minute Ianthe killed the wretched Primrose in the same way and for the same reason that I described when I was making a case against Melissa." Nigel outlined it for the benefit of the other two. He went on, "When she went out onto the fo'c's'le with Primrose, Ianthe suspected, from the way the child hinted at things, that she'd witnessed the murder of Melissa. Then Primrose pushed her into the swimming pool, and Ianthe

lost her head and her temper, and dragged Primrose in and strangled her It was her first bad mistake. With the child murdered, Ianthe's 'disappearance' could not be accepted so readily as the suicide of a deranged woman. Well, Ianthe managed to get back to the cabin. She took off her soaking clothes, and the next moment Nikki came prancing in. The cabin was dark—"

"You mean, Ianthe hadn't turned on the light? Why on earth not?" asked Clare.

"Panic. She'd only one thought in her head—to strip off the wet clothes which would betray her. It was a simple, instinctive compulsion to stay in the dark till she'd got a grip on herself again. But it was Nikki who got a grip on her. He thought it was the divine and willing Melissa. But the naked woman he found in the darkness there proved to be far from willing. She fought him savagely, *and in silence.* I ought to have seen the point of that long before I did."

"In silence?" Faith asked. "I don't get it."

"Melissa, if Peter will allow me, was a highly experienced woman. In fact, a bit of a whore. If the woman in the cabin had been Melissa, she'd never have been panicked by Nikki, never have fought; she'd have spoken to him, calmed him down, made some excuse for not wanting him just then. Or she might have let him have his way. But the woman in the cabin acted like an inexperienced virgin. She struggled. She dared not cry out, because it might bring other passengers into the cabin, who would turn on the light and see that it was Ianthe there. Even if it didn't, Nikki might have recognized that the voice was not Melissa's, for Ianthe was so agitated by what was happening that she knew she wouldn't be able to mimic Melissa's voice successfully. Well, she did get rid of Nikki. She dressed for the dance in Melissa's clothes, sprayed oil on her wet hair, and made up. She tended to overdo this, by the way. Mrs. Hale had remarked to me before the dance, at dinner, that Melissa was made up more heavily even than usual. But that was Ianthe's trouble. She overdid things Like those swans."

"*Swans?* What swans?" said Faith, gaping at him.

"Ianthe behaved in a remarkably rational way, almost throughout," said Nigel, as if he had not heard the question. "She was a formidably intelligent woman, of course. She never attempted to cast suspicion on anyone else, for instance, and she stuck to her original plan, even after Primrose had pushed in and greatly complicated things. When I talked to her alone, the morning after the murders, she resisted the temptation to say too much "

"Did you know, then, that she was really Ianthe?" Peter asked.

"I knew the woman I was talking to must be Ianthe, unless I had misin-

terpreted every single piece of evidence. But I must admit there were moments when I could hardly believe she was not the real Melissa. She had Melissa's voice, and eyes, and pose. The features were somehow, indefinably, coarser; but that could have been the effect of shock and grief. And she did talk rather more intelligently than I'd heard Melissa talking. But on the whole she gave a wonderfully convincing impression of Melissa's personality."

"I'm not surprised," said Clare. "She'd always been jealous of her sister. As a girl, she'd desperately wanted to *be* Melissa—the daughter whom their father loved. I've no doubt, in those days, she copied Melissa often—consciously and unconsciously."

"Yes, that's a good point. The only time she seemed at all disconcerted, during this interview, was when I brought up the question of the wet dress. She couldn't help remembering the bloodstains she'd washed off. However, she recovered her poise very quickly, and gave me a natural explanation for its having got wet. No, she came through it extremely well, apart from her tendency to overdo things."

"Like those mysterious swans again, I suppose?" said Faith with an impish look

Nigel again ignored the question "Melissa was a fairly tough number. She admitted to me she was a selfish woman. Now I don't think Melissa would ever have been so shocked and prostrated by her sister's death—after all, Ianthe had threatened suicide—as the bogus Melissa gave herself out to be."

"She would have been, if she'd committed the murders."

"Certainly, Peter But there was never any conceivable reason why Melissa should kill Ianthe. But if it was the other way around, as I believed it was, Ianthe would need all the respite and privacy she could get; so the bogus Melissa exaggerated the natural effects of shock. If I hadn't been there to poke my nose in, I believe she'd still have got away with it, in spite of the Primrose complication."

"If the Greek police are as susceptible as Nikki, she would," Clare said.

"They'd not have pressed her hard. With any luck, she could rely on their accepting the theory that Ianthe had had a brainstorm, murdered Primrose, and then thrown herself off the ship Ianthe had been playing up her nervous condition like mad for days, and—"

"Like the swans?" said Faith.

"What *is* all this about swans?" Peter demanded.

"I can tell you," said Clare dreamily "They had ants in their wing-pits"

"Which of course explains everything," Peter dryly remarked.

"It does, you know," said Nigel. "From the start of the voyage, I was puzzled by Ianthe's behavior. She jumped out of her skin whenever the ship's siren blew. She sat about the deck, looking like a lump of dough sodden with misery. She twitched and winced and flared up. She made a scene at Jeremy Street's first lecture She made a scene in the cave on Patmos; and she made yet another when I offered my sympathy over this. She was deliberately building up the impression of an unstable mind. Now, if she'd genuinely been as bad as all that, the doctors would never have allowed her out of the nursing home Melissa told me, that day on Delos—"

"What a lot Melissa told you that day on Delos," Clare remarked.

"Yes. She told me the doctors had said it was quite all right for Ianthe to go on a cruise; she was 'well over the worst.' But Ianthe was now telling Melissa she had nothing worth living for, couldn't go on any longer, etc. So I began to wonder, quite idly, what all this malingering was in aid of. Why should Ianthe give these public exhibitions of a suicidal tendency? But I dare say my mind would never have started working on this line, but for something that happened months before the cruise."

"Ah, now we come to them at last," said Faith.

"Yes. Clare and I were walking by the Serpentine, and we saw a mob of swans behaving in a very peculiar way." Nigel described the scene in detail. "So Clare made some frivolous and heartless remark about their being afflicted with ants."

"And you said they must be having a nervous breakdown," Clare put in.

"And what did *you* say then, my love?"

"I can't recollect. Something forceful and intelligent, I've no doubt "

"It was. More so than you knew You said, 'Well, if they are, they're overdoing it badly.' "

THE WORM OF DEATH

For John Garrett

Note to the Reader: I have taken three liberties in this book (a) to alter the weather of February, 1960, (b) to build a house where no house is—on a certain quay in East Greenwich; and (c) to install Dr. Piers Loudron, his daughter, and two of his sons in my own house at Greenwich.

N.B.

1. *DINNER AT THE DOCTOR'S*

Nigel Strangeways and Clare were strolling down the hill past the Park. It was foggy, this February night, and the six-o'clock news had promised worse fog to come. From the Thames a hoarse bellowing broke out, and, like the pandemonium in a jungle when one great animal roars, it was followed by a series of hoots, yelps, bronchitic snorts, and breathy howls as the river traffic crept cautiously through the murk. If the fog got worse, the traffic would seize up altogether.

It was only two months since Nigel and Clare had moved to Greenwich, but these river noises, which even on a clear night seemed to come from no particular direction but to sound stereophonically all round one's house, were already familiar to them—an intermittent background music to their work and days.

"I love this place," said Clare, slipping her hand into Nigel's overcoat pocket. "I can work here."

They had rented two floors of a Queen Anne house overlooking the Park. The ground floor, for all its age, was solid enough to support the masses of stone that Clare worked on. They had turned the double drawing room into a studio, and acquired a daily to do the cleaning. This admirable woman, Em, a lighterman's wife of proportions almost as titanic as the over-life-size nude that Clare was sculpting, had reeled back when she first saw it, exclaiming, "God! What's that thing?"

"A female nude."

Em eyed it as if it were some convulsion of nature. "Fair gives you the creeps, don't it," she said. "See its bloody double, I did once, when our Stan took me to one of them horror films."

But after this shaky start, though Em would never take a duster to any of the figures in the studio, she and Clare got on famously, gossiping away like mad while the chips flew and the cups of char flowed down Em's enormous gullet.

Through Em, they were already well briefed about the Loudrons, with whom they were dining that night. Dr. Piers Loudron had been in practice here for nearly forty years, a lovely man, a real gent, don't stand no nonsense, though; saved our Stan when we all thought he was going to croak—these were some of the tributes paid by Em, whose view of the medical

profession otherwise ranged from the sardonic to the blistering. Dr. Piers' eldest son, Dr. James Loudron, who was in practice with him, she dismissed as a poor substitute for his dad; he took all day to make up his mind whether you'd got sunburn or leprosy; he had newfangled notions; he failed to hand out those "bottles of the pink" that were Dr. Piers' panacea for wind; he was a stickler for etiquette and printed forms—"wouldn't cut you up without he had a dotted line to cut along." James' younger brother, Harold, was something in the City and lived in a house on the riverbank with his wife, Sharon, as to whom Em said she couldn't half tell you some dirt if you pressed her—and told you a good deal without pressure. Dr. Piers' own household was made up by an adopted son, Graham, and a daughter, Rebecca, who now housekept for him, his wife having died some twenty years before. Rebecca, according to Em, "favors her mum, poor soul." As to Graham, Em gave the impression that he was a dark horse and a bit of a lad, and that Dr. Piers had a special soft spot for him.

The amber street lighting, which turned Clare's magnolia-white skin to an implausible mauve, filtered through the fog to show the façade of an early-Georgian house, one of two pairs, at the corner of Crooms Hill and Burney Street The woodwork outside was painted white. So, they found when they went in, was the paneling of the hall, the stairs, and the first-floor drawing room to which Rebecca Loudron led them.

"My goodness, what a lovely room!" exclaimed Clare, her eyes roving over the yellow fitted carpet, the glowing little landscapes set within the white panels, the richly patterned curtains with their design of yellow flowers and gray feathers in swags on a white background, the button-back chairs, yellow, green, dove-gray, and a single tomato-colored one echoing the red in a picture on the far wall.

"And what exquisite proportions! It's almost a perfect cube, isn't it?"

"What? Oh, is it? I'm afraid I don't know much about architecture. I'm glad you like it." Rebecca Loudron was clearly not at ease with strangers Her sentences came blurting out, as though she had not breath enough for more than a few words at a time, and her sallow face flushed darker. She'd be quite handsome, thought Nigel, if she took herself in hand; but what possessed her, with that complexion, to wear a coffee-colored dress?

"Well, I do congratulate you on this room," he said.

"Oh, it's Father, really. He's the one with taste. He's very fastidious—you know, about colors and things, I mean."

"Unusual in a doctor, that, isn't it?" said Clare, appearing not to notice the overtones in Miss Loudron's last remarks.

"I suppose so. But it needs money, and time too." Rebecca lapsed back

into the artificial hostessy manner of a small girl entertaining her dolls at a tea party. "My brothers will be down soon. The fog seems to be getting worse; James must have been delayed on his rounds. How do you like living in Greenwich, Mrs. Strangeways?"

"Very much. But I'm not Mrs. Strangeways, you know Clare Massinger," said Clare, smiling pleasantly.

"Oh. But I thought—I mean—" Rebecca flushed and floundered. Nigel came to her rescue.

"No. We live together. But Clare is tremendously old-fashioned. She believes that marriage is for the procreation of children and the raising of families. And her lifework is making her children out of stone and wood She simply couldn't divide her attention between them and real ones. So we've never married. But it's all very respectable."

"Oh, I do admire that!" exclaimed Rebecca, unexpectedly.

"What do you admire, Becky dear?" came a voice from the door.

"Mr Strangeways was telling me about Miss Massinger's sculpture. Miss Massinger, let me introduce my brother James."

Dr. James Loudron was a bulky, awkward man of about thirty, with a distinct resemblance to his sister. His eyes had a guarded look, which might mean discretion or secretiveness, and made the heartiness of his manner seem superficial.

"Well, you might have given them a drink," he said.

"I was waiting for you."

James Loudron dispensed drinks, with the air of pouring them from a graduated measure. While he was thus engaged, his sister murmured aside to Clare, "I wouldn't mention—what we were talking about. James is rather conventional, you know."

James came over from the piano, on which the drink tray rested. When he had given them their glasses, he stooped down, washing his hands at the fire.

"Devilish cold tonight. And the fog's going to get worse. Hope Mrs. Hyams doesn't start."

"You doctors," remarked Clare, in her high, light voice, "do live restless lives Always leaping up from the table to rush out and deliver another baby."

"We're used to that," said Rebecca. "Meals in this house are movable feasts."

James was looking at Clare as if he had not properly seen her before "You know Mrs. Hyams?"

"No. I was just making a deduction."

"I see," he solemnly replied. "Quite She is expecting to be confined any day now. Have you any children, Miss—er—Mrs —"

"Only stone and wood ones," Rebecca put in, with a skittishness Nigel found slightly embarrassing.

"Stone and wood babies?" asked James, baffled.

A voice from behind them said, "She carves them, brother James. She's a sculptor. She sculpts. Or should it be sculptress?"

"Sculptor," said Clare. "How do you do?"

"I'm honored to meet you. I'm Graham Loudron."

The young man who came forward, after delivering these remarks with a perfectly expressionless face, was of medium height, lean and whippy—about twenty years old, Nigel judged, though it was difficult to tell with a face in which experience and immaturity were so patently blended; the cosmopolitan sort of face one might expect to see above a white sharkskin dinner jacket in some smarty night club.

Taking a drink, Graham perched himself easily on the arm of Rebecca's chair. "Hullo, ducky. How's the dinner going? My sister is a first-class cook. That's because she's so greedy."

"I'm *not!*" cried Rebecca, highly delighted. "Anyway, it'll spoil if Papa doesn't come soon. Where is he?"

"Waiting to make an entrance," replied Graham, his face still expressionless, which left it open whether the remark had been malicious or just teasing.

"I don't find that awfully amusing, in front of strangers—visitors," James said gruffly.

"Amusing? Of course not; it's merely true. And I like people who have a sense of occasion Pop makes his exits and his entrances as if the spotlights were on him. What's wrong with the grand manner?"

James Loudron grunted, shaking his large head in a baffled, angry way, like a bull baited It was another zoological simile, however, that vaguely stirred at the back of Nigel's mind as he studied Graham. Glancing at Clare, he saw that, in the telepathic way by which their thoughts occasionally communicated, she was with him. Her lips silently formed the words "fruit bat." Yes, that was what Graham reminded him of: triangular face, broad low forehead sloping down to narrow chin; ears a little pointed; small, fleshy, pouted mouth But did fruit bats have long noses? Graham's was long, and its tip seemed likely at any moment to quiver with an animal sort of curiosity. An inquisitive nose.

What he had said about making an entrance was abundantly justified in a few minutes. The door opened, and Dr. Piers Loudron stood inside it for a

moment before advancing to greet his guests. Clare was instantly reminded of B.B.—the great Bernard Berenson, with whom she had often stayed at Settignano; it was not only the pause at the door, and the ceremonious touch of being last to arrive, like an ambassador at a private party: the small, frail, spruce, upright figure; the neat white beard; the hands loosely clasped in front of the black velvet jacket; the general air of urbane autocracy and an almost *petit-maître* elegance—all these brought back to Clare her beloved though exigent B.B.

Dr. Piers came forward and took both her hands, gazing at her for a moment, his old eyes blue as lapis lazuli.

"My dear, this is a very great pleasure to me. The genius I have long recognized, but I had not known that such beauty went with it."

Nigel overheard Graham mutter to Rebecca, "Giving her the full treatment, what?" He had been aware, at Dr. Piers Loudron's entrance, of a sudden tension in the room—a tension he presumed at the time to come from the other Loudrons' unconscious screwing of themselves up to resist the strong personality of their father.

After an exchange of compliments with Clare, their host turned to Nigel. "And your name is not unfamiliar to me either. Welcome to my house. I am delighted that we are to be neighbors You must forgive me, you and Miss Massinger, for not being here to receive you. *You* will understand what kept me, Strangeways, when I tell you that I was writing and quite lost my sense of time."

"*Writing,* Papa?" Rebecca almost squeaked "Whatever do you mean?"

"I should have thought the expression was not unintelligible." Sheathing his claws again, the old man turned to his guests. "I have begun to keep a diary. A personal diary. I have never done so since I was a child, and now I'm in my second childhood, the wheel has come full circle." He gave Clare a wickedly enchanting smile. "I shall have a lot to write in it tomorrow. My first meeting with the great Clare Massinger. The table talk of that distinguished expert Nigel Strangeways."

"Oh? What's he an expert in, Papa?" Rebecca blurted

Her father said, in a velvety tone, "All in good time, Becky. What is table talk without a table? You know, if I die of starvation tonight, I shall not be able to keep up my diary."

Rebecca Loudron glared at him sulkily. "It only needs dishing up. But I can take a hint." She went out, breathing hard

The awkward silence was broken by James. "But *why* have you started keeping a diary, Father? I don't see the point."

"My dear boy, at my age, and when one's tenure of life is unlikely to be

long protracted, one feels the need not exactly"—he gestured with a delicate white hand—"not exactly for confession but for the drawing up of a balance sheet."

"Nonsense, Father," James broke in, "you're good for another twenty years. Well, ten years at least."

"Thank you, dear boy, for your prognosis. It is meant well, I am sure. But prognosis was never your strongest point."

James Loudron's childishly disgruntled expression made him look more than ever like his sister. The old man, thought Nigel, must be Jewish: the cutting, snubbing manner, the opulent verbiage, the autocratic air of one who is beyond challenge the head of his tribe; he's an old show-off too, but excellent company—if you're not a member of his family.

"Yes," Dr. Piers was saying to Clare, "my diary is giving me quite a new interest in life. It may even prolong it. Who knows?"

"I shouldn't bank on that," remarked Graham Loudron, in an unexpectedly controversial tone.

"Oh, I'm not *banking* on it, Graham. But why do *you* say—"

A scream from belowstairs, which startled Clare, proved to be Rebecca Loudron announcing dinner.

"Why on earth can't we have a gong?" asked James.

"Gongs," his father answered, "are for butlers or suburban householders."

"Isn't S E. 10 suburban enough for a gong?" murmured Graham.

" 'The clamorous harbinger of victuals,' " quoted Dr. Piers. "Will you come, Miss Massinger?"

The dining room would certainly not have disgraced a butler, its round rosewood table set with Georgian silver, the paneled walls painted the color of eucalyptus leaf. On the wall behind Dr. Piers hung an oil of a severe-looking raw-boned lady, evidently the mother of James and Rebecca; Nigel caught James glancing at it with an expression that gave life to his heavy face, while Graham went into the adjoining kitchen to help Rebecca with the dishes.

She was certainly a first-class cook. After the *ceuf mimosa*, they ate a delicious *coq au vin*. Dr. Piers, in a manner which suggested that he normally left such duties to others but was doing it as a mark of special favor for her, had poured Clare a glass of wine, then resigned the decanter to James.

"Bonnes Mares, isn't it?" said Clare. "My favorite Burgundy. Aren't we in luck tonight?"

"So, Miss Massinger? You're quite right. But what *expertise!*"

Rebecca, coming in from the kitchen with her own plate, and having caught only the tail end of these exchanges, said, "Now you must tell us, Mr. Strangeways, *what* you're an expert at. I'm sure I ought to know, but—"

"He's an expert," announced their host, "in criminology"

"You mean he writes books about murders?"

"No. He catches murderers," Dr. Piers said, with a flatness of statement far removed from his normal style.

There was a second or two of absolute silence. Then Rebecca, staring at Nigel in consternation or incredulity, came out with "You *catch?* Are you at Scotland Yard?"

"No. But I have friends there."

"You mean you're a sort of private detective?" asked James.

"Sort of."

"But isn't this exciting!" Rebecca gasped. "Do tell us how you work."

Nigel had opened his mouth to reply, when he perceived that Clare, affected perhaps by the tension in this household of which he himself had been intermittently aware, was about to have one of her occasional fits of Going Too Far.

"It's really quite simple," she began, her tone crystal clear and twinkling like the drops on a chandelier. "One of Nigel's uncles was an Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard—he got Nigel to help unofficially over one or two cases. That's how it started—that, and Nigel's passion for poking his nose into other people's affairs, particularly the unsavory ones. No one can compete with the C.I.D. at collecting and sifting evidence; their machine is about as good as any could be for dealing with the ordinary gamut of crime. But now and then something turns up that needs inside knowledge—some nonprofessional crime, so to speak. Then Nigel insinuates himself into the confidence of the suspects; they've often no notion what a viper they've taken into their bosom until it's too late. He worms his way along, deeper and deeper through the secret passages of people's lives—"

"Your metaphor is quite revolting," said Nigel.

"Talking of secret passages," Rebecca put in hurriedly, "did you know there are supposed to be a lot in Greenwich, under the Park?"

James said, "Yes, when Harold and I were kids, we spent hours down in the cellars here, tapping the walls to see if we could find the entrance to one of the passages. We never did, though."

"Reverting to the Strangeways method," said Clare, "it has to be mentioned that he does rather attract crime; things tend to happen in his vicinity. I suppose it's quite natural, when—good God, what's that?"

A harsh, strangulated howl tore the air.

" 'Adiposity,' " said James.

" 'Acidity,' I think," said Rebecca, giggling.

"I beg your pardon?"

"There's a line of coastal ships that come into Deptford Creek," James explained. "They all have those peculiar sirens, and names ending in '-ity' One is called 'Argosity,' for instance."

"And another 'Aridity' Fancy a ship being called 'Aridity'!"

"That's because it carries sand, no doubt—to the cement works"

"James used to invent absurd names for them, to amuse me when I was little," Rebecca added.

"And they still amuse you, it seems," said Dr. Piers Loudron.

His daughter's heavy face, which had been animated for a few moments, looked quenched again. There was an uncomfortable silence Graham Loudron switched his curiously intent gaze from Clare to Nigel.

"But *why* do you do it?" he asked.

"Criminal investigation, you mean?"

"Yes. Do you have noble ideas about justice and retribution and all that? Do you see yourself as a hound of heaven tracking down the wrongdoer?"

"No," Nigel equably replied. "It's chiefly that I'm curious about people —particularly the pathological states of mind."

"You think you can really understand them without sharing them—those states of mind?"

"Up to a point. Also, it's just as well that murderers shouldn't be allowed to indulge in their pastime. Or don't you agree?" Nigel added, seeing that Graham was determined to be controversial.

"So you are, in fact, high-minded about it," said the young man, the sneer in his tone contrasting oddly with the serious, almost deferential expression on his face. "I can't understand why you don't leave this sort of dirty work to the police. They are at least paid for it."

"Oh, so am I. I charge high fees."

"So you should." Graham was openly malicious now. "I agree with Shaw that men who clean out sewers should get the highest wages in the country."

"So do I," remarked Clare. "And what are you doing, Mr. Loudron, to implement this excellent principle?"

"My brother preaches. He leaves practice to the lower grades of humanity," said James, who had taken a second helping of each course

"I think the fog is getting into our brains," said Dr. Piers mildly. Nigel had noticed him glancing vivaciously at the disputants during these ex-

changes; the old man seemed indulgent toward his adopted son—to be tacitly encouraging Graham, almost, in his provocative remarks—with a favoritism that must have been galling to James and Rebecca. "Wouldn't you say, Miss Massinger, that natural talent and acquired skills should be rewarded more highly than the sort of mechanical labor that any moron can perform?"

"Cooking, for instance," interrupted Graham Loudron. "Look at Becky's talent and skill. Oughtn't we to pay her more?"

"Oh, really!" James broke out indignantly. "This conversation is ridiculous."

"I don't agree," said Graham. "I'm being perfectly logical."

"Well, then, you have a tremendous talent for doing damn-all, how much ought you to be paid for—"

"Children, children!" their father said. "You'll be giving our guests the impression that they are dining in the nursery. Let's go upstairs now. Harold and his wife are coming in after dinner, so you'll have an opportunity of meeting the rest of my quarrelsome family, Miss Massinger. Sharon is quite a beauty; good bone; her head might interest you."

His own, thought Clare, as they sat in the drawing room, is interesting enough, but in my medium I could never do justice to the most interesting thing about it—the swift, unpredictable alterations of vivacity and melancholy, when he withdraws into himself, it is like the sun going in, the whole room seems overcast. Of course, he's an old man, frail. These withdrawals are a way he conserves his energy? Well, partly that; but also a way of impressing his personality on us, of dominating the company without expending effort? Because he's a bit of a domestic pasha, all right. Unobtrusively Clare studied Dr. Piers' face, steeped just now in melancholy, the square, thin mouth turned down at the corners in an expression of bitter, tragic acceptance. For a moment she seemed to be looking at his death mask.

The next moment, Sharon and Harold Loudron entering, Dr. Piers was all animation again. He fussed over his daughter-in-law, led her to a chair by the fire, introduced her to Clare and Nigel, teased her about a new sable scarf she was wearing.

"What did I tell you, Miss Massinger?" he said, with a kind of proprietorial gaiety. "Beautiful bone, eh?" He patted Sharon's cheek.

"You're a very susceptible, flattering old man," she coolly remarked, snatching a cigarette from a box, her hand shaking as she put a match to it. "B'rrh, it's cold outside. I've swallowed about a hundred cubic feet of fog walking here."

"You smoke too much, my dear. And eat too little," said Dr. Piers, giving her a clinical scrutiny.

"I have to keep my figure. Never know when I shan't need it again. Harold's—"

"Now, darling! Please," said her husband quickly. "That can keep."

Harold Loudron is like a shadow of his father, thought Nigel, a silhouette The same features, but no depth to them. A smallish, spruce, upright figure. Uxorious, too—hovering over that red-headed young harpy as if she were a prize orchid. Not that, in her febrile way, she isn't highly attractive. He could still feel the hot, hard rubbery texture of her small hand when they were introduced; it felt like an animal's paw, and there was a glitter in her green eyes—the eyes which now, glancing to and fro over the others as she talked, noticeably missed out those of Graham Loudron, though his were fastened upon her.

Presently, getting into conversation with Harold, Nigel found to his surprise that this rather colorless young businessman had another ruling passion beside his wife. He was a river enthusiast. He and Sharon lived in one of several houses that his mother had bought before the war. It was right on the river wall, beyond the Greenwich power station. "At high tide, I could dive straight into eight feet of water out of our dining-room window. Only I'd be certain to get typhoid, Papa says—the Thames is absolutely foul, you know, in this reach."

The house had been badly shaken by bombing, but they had reconditioned it, and Harold had even bought an old spritsail barge, which he moored at a wharf adjoining the house.

"But you can't sail her singlehanded, surely?" said Nigel.

"No. Afraid not She's on the mud now." Harold's face, suddenly overcast with melancholy, took on a still closer resemblance to his father's. "I used to get friends down. And Sharon was keen at first. But . . . I've got a launch now Rather a beauty—" He came out with a flood of technical detail. "But it's not the same as sail."

"Couldn't you have a sailing dinghy, or a little yawl—something like that?"

"Current's too strong. We get a six-knot tide round the Isle of Dogs, you know. Fierce. You need a strong wind to move against it."

He went on to talk interestingly about the history of the river. But Nigel felt that it was all rather mechanical; half Harold's mind seemed to be elsewhere, and his eyes kept restlessly glancing off to where his father was deep in conversation with Clare and Sharon. It was as if Harold were doing calculations in his head while he talked.

Rising, Sharon walked gracefully over "General post," she said to her husband. "Jehovah commands. You go and exercise your charms on Miss Massinger Not," she added, after Harold had obediently moved across, "that the poor sweet can compete with his aged parent. Piers is a real killer, you know; twenty years ago none of us would have been safe from him"

Sharon had lowered her voice to a husky murmur. Disposing herself on the sofa beside Nigel, she contrived to give a strong impression that she was getting into bed with him. Her green eyes, gazing into his, had a moony, swimming look. "I've been hearing all about you from Piers Tell me, how many secret passages have you found tonight?"

Damn and blast Clare, thought Nigel. He said, "Give me time. I've only been here a couple of hours."

"You wait. We're honeycombed with them."

"Like a Compton-Burnett family?"

"Probably. But a book is a thing I never read. Well, then, tell me, who is the most interesting person in this room?"

"Interesting how?"

"Interesting to you as a student of crime."

Nigel had a disconcerting habit of taking such gambits more seriously than they were offered. "Well," he said briskly, allowing his pale-blue eyes to rest upon the girl's, "there's you. I'd say you would do almost anything for a kick."

"Almost?" Her green eyes swooned over him.

"What are you trying just now? Larceny? Blackmail? Drugs? Piracy? Murder?"

At one of these words, Sharon's eyes flickered as if the current had been momentarily cut off. "Well, I *must* say! I'm not sure you're very nice after all."

"But, of course, if you ask me which of the present company is potentially the most delinquent, I'd—"

Nigel's revelations were cut short by a loud tattoo on the front-door knocker.

"Oh, hell!" exclaimed James Loudron. "A call, I suppose"

"It may be Walter. He said he might drop in." Rebecca glanced defiantly at her father as she hurried to the door His elegant white hand set down the coffee cup trembling.

"That mountebank!" he exclaimed. "So now he's started inviting *himself* to my house" But Rebecca was already out of the room.

"Another skeleton for you," whispered Sharon to Nigel. "But he won't

stay in the cupboard. Becky's sweet on him. It's her maternal instinct. He's Pop's uttermost bête noire. Walt Barn. He paints."

"Mountebank" seemed an all too apt description of the young man who now entered, with the air of one who at any moment might do a double backward somersault. He was little more than five feet high; his extremely broad and powerful-looking shoulders were surmounted by a small, quite round head, a fringe of hair low over the forehead. He had a snub nose, and blue eyes that danced with intelligence or mischief, yet looked incorruptibly innocent Whether or no he knew there would be a dinner party on tonight, he had made no concessions to Greenwich high life; he wore a thick, scarlet fisherman's sweater and paint-stained blue corduroys.

After offering his hand to Dr Piers, who ignored it, he drew up all his sixty inches in front of the fireplace and surveyed the company.

"Ha!" he cried. "All the beauty and some of the brains of Greenwich assembled. Sharon"—he bobbed at her—"our well-known ex-yachtswoman and ex-commodore of the flouncing flotilla of ex-models. Hiya, James, you earnest old quack! Hysterectomies coming along nicely? And Harold—big deal Harold, the terror of Mincepudding Lane. And who do I see cowering in the corner over there? None other than our inscrutable Graham, the beatest beat on the South Bank."

"Do stop showing off, Walt," said Rebecca. "You haven't met Miss Clare Massinger."

"Only in the spirit." Walter Barn went down on his hunkers in front of Clare, hands on knees. "What d'ya love?" he inquired.

"My art, and my comforts," she composedly replied.

"You have a right to. You're good." He jerked his little round head sideways at the others. "She's *very* good. I, Walt Barn, am telling you, so let's have a few moments' silence to mark our appreciation of a great artist." Ignoring his own request, he sprang up like a jack-in-the-box and addressed Nigel. "Are you one of this lady's comforts?"

"Yes."

"A pity," remarked the young painter gloomily. "I could fancy a slice of her myself."

"You stick to your painting, Mr. Barn," said Clare. "You've got something."

"Do you honestly think so?" His clowning slipped like a mask. "You've seen my work?"

"Yes. But those muddy tones—you'll never get anywhere with them. It's not the way you see things. Come now, is it?"

"By God, I believe you're right!" he muttered, after a long, agonized pause. "But how the devil could you know?"

"I didn't. Till I met you."

Walter Barn plumped himself down at her feet again "Oh, man! What a moment in Barn's life! The scales fall from his eyes. No more mud, says Massinger. Well, what do you know?" He fell silent, awed by the revelation. Even the glass of whisky that Rebecca had put on the floor beside him went unnoticed.

During these exchanges Dr. Piers had made no attempt to conceal his distaste for the young man or his displeasure at Rebecca's having brought him in. He sat stiffly upright in his wing chair, hands folded, eyes closed, dissociating himself from the conversation like a delicate ivory figurine, an idol, temporarily forgotten. But, seeing the clasped hands quivering, Nigel wondered if it were just because Dr. Piers must always be the center of attention that he was now disgruntled, was positively sulking Or had he some graver reason for detesting Walter Barn? At least he had not made a scene and ordered this unwelcome visitor out of the house.

James and Harold were now standing together in a far corner of the room, talking in undertones. From the way their eyes glanced discreetly from their father to their sister, Nigel gathered they must be talking about Dr. Piers' attitude toward Rebecca and her impossible young man James had a stiff, outraged expression on his heavy features, Harold appeared to be agreeing with him, but in a distrait manner, as though he had more important things on his mind.

Graham Loudron had come to perch on the arm of the sofa beside Sharon.

"I'll be getting that record for you in a few days," he said.

"Good. I can hardly wait" She turned to Nigel, on her other side. "Graham'd be tops as a jazz pianist if he wasn't so lazy. He used to play with Lew Lindy's band."

"Which Mr. Strangeways has never heard of"

Nigel admitted ignorance.

"Which do you like best— Rock? Bop? Classical jazz? No You're a thirties' type, aren't you? It'd be the blues."

Going over the piano, he started playing "St James Infirmary." But after a minute he slid into "Frankie and Johnnie," of which he gave a scintillating but unnerving performance, for he distorted each successive stanza of the ballad into a different rhythm, from the proper one to a waltz, then to a tango, then a fox trot, then a stony, stunning rock beat, and so on, but

always returning to the original rhythm for the refrain. He stopped in the middle of a bar.

"Period music," he said, leaving the piano.

"I don't dig it," said Walter Barn.

"The new barbarism," Dr. Piers remarked. "It's the sign of ultimate decadence when the civilized start aping the savage." He spoke for some minutes, with elegant and mordant satire, about what he called "the cult of the tough," "the worship of the morally and intellectually muscle-bound." Before he had finished, a querulous note had crept into the old man's voice, but it was a mark of his authority, rather than a concession to his age, that no one in the room ventured to dispute his argument.

"Well, I can't help it," said Rebecca into the ensuing silence. "I like an old-fashioned waltz better than anything."

"Good for you, ducks," remarked Walter. "The old-time fragrance. You're a lavender-and-coffee-lace girl. That's what *they* think. But we know better, don't we?" He gave her a smacking kiss.

"Mother used to play waltzes—on that very piano," said James Loudron. "D'you remember, Becky, how we used to caper round? Pretend we were at a ball?"

"Yes," said his sister. "And then one day she locked the piano and never played it again."

"She played a lot of wrong notes, I expect," said Harold, "but I was too young to know."

"She didn't have Graham's—er—dexterity. But—"

"But she played, no doubt," said Graham softly, "with intense feeling."

James Loudron's large hands clenched, and he looked dangerous.

"Ah, yes," their father interposed, his old voice thin and sad as the last of many echoes "Yes. Janet was a woman of feeling."

2. *MISSING FROM HIS HOME*

Three days later, Clare opened the front door to let in Em, swathed by a coiling ectoplasm of fog.

"You shouldn't have bothered to come in this, Em."

"Anything to get out of me own house My old man's been sitting about best part of three days now, wearing out his fanny. No work, see, not with the fog. Lighterman's disease he's got. Constipation. All that stuff piling up at the wharf, and he can't unload. Proper foul temper he's in. Don't know how you can stand having Him"— Em jerked her thumb up in the direction of Nigel's study—"mooning about here all day. Ain't natural "

Em divested herself of several coats and mufflers, entered the studio, and cast her usual unillusioned look at the Female Nude.

"You aren't half taking a time at That," she said.

"It's slow work."

"Well, you know best What happens when it's finished?"

"I exhibit it. In a gallery."

Em chuckled phlegmily. "She's making an exhibition of herself, if you ask me. I wouldn't half catch it if my old man found me like that Before 'e'd turned the light off, I mean. Well, I must do me stairs. Funny thing about Dr. Piers, ain't it?"

"Dr. Piers?"

"What? Didn't you know?" Em, in the manner of her kind, assumed that gossip arrived everywhere at the same moment. "He's scarpered."

"Run away?"

"Well, he's not there, anyway. They comes down to breakfast yesterday, and he's disappeared. Not in his room. Not in the house nowhere. That Dr. James was trying to hush it up like, but my niece Joan, who cleans for them, she heard him and Miss Rebecca arguing about it She was for telling the cops, but he said no, maybe their dad had had a call—you know, emergency —and didn't have time to leave a message But that was yesterday morning, and he's still not back. Joan said Dr James said his dad might have had magnesia."

Em favored Clare with the blank expression she always put on when she was trying out her comic-Cockney-char turn. Clare had been caught out once, and she was not buying it again.

"Amnesia, presumably?"

"That's right," said Em. "Joan's an ignorant piece. Just what would 'amnesia' mean?"

"Loss of memory," said Nigel, who had just entered. The situation was explained to him.

"How do you get this amnesia?" Em asked.

"A knock on the head. Or a long period of acute strain—mental strain. Most of the people reported as missing are suffering from amnesia."

"You mean," said Em shrewdly, "they're taking a sort of rest cure from themselves?"

"That's just about it."

Em pondered a moment. "Can't see the old doc doing that. To look at, you'd think you could blow him away like a cobweb, but he's tough as they come."

"It's often the tough who crack up, Em. No resilience. Too rigid. Can't let up on themselves."

"Well, I don't rightly know about that, sir. But I remember when that little old Hitler started his blitzes, Dr. Piers used to be out all day and night —we had it bad round here—saved hundreds of lives, I reckon. When we was bombed out—that was when my poor old dad got his—Dr. Piers turned up before the dust had settled, bandaged us up, took Mum to the hospital, bedded us kids down in his own house—I was fifteen then. Bloody marvel that man was. Night after night he'd be there, going into burning houses, crawling about under the rubble. They all said it was like he didn't care whether he lived or died. My dad was on the Heavy Rescue before he got his lot; I remember him telling us he was at an incident, and Dr. Piers was there, and another bomb fell and the blast blew the doctor right across the street up against a lamppost. Well, they picked him up and told him to go off home and have a kip 'No, boys,' says Dr Piers, 'I can't sleep nowadays. Let's get on with it!' White as a ghost he looked, my dad says, and sad —sort of blue look on his face as if nothing couldn't do no more to him. Well," Em turned away with a gusty sigh, "I must get out me vacuum. Time and tide wait for no man. But I tell you this—if anyone done anything to old Dr Piers, 'e better clear out of these parts quick or 'e'd find himself hung out to dry in someone's back yard."

Nigel and Clare talked about it in a desultory way over lunch. It was difficult to reconcile Em's picture of Dr. Piers as the desperate hero with the urbane, cultivated, frail, rather tyrannical old man they had met at dinner three nights before. But crisis could bring out an alter ego, and twenty years was long enough to obliterate it again. Certainly at dinner they

had not been conscious of any suppressed strain in the old man that might have caused a sudden amnesia; tension there had been, but distributed evenly—or so it seemed—over his oddly assorted family.

"The one queer thing," said Nigel, "is that he should have made such a point, at a family gathering, of bringing out my interest in crime. It was somehow not quite in character with his—his kind of fastidiousness."

"And what may we infer from that, my darling old muck-raker? You're surely not suggesting that he was putting you forward as the man to be consulted if some such problem arose? He could hardly know that he was *going* to have an attack of amnesia and walk out on them."

"No. But—" Nigel broke off. "Ah, well, as my old tutor used to say, speculation in this field is idle. I wonder will any of them come to me"

"It won't be Dr. James, anyway. If he can't hush it up, he'd do everything through the regulation channels. But why should he try and hush it up?"

"The practice. One little puff of scandal, and patients start going elsewhere. Graham Loudron might."

"Consult you? Young fruit bat? Why?"

"He's inquisitive. He's the type, I suspect, who enjoys setting the cat among the pigeons. And he doesn't like me; he'd get a kick out of seeing me fall down on the job."

"I think he's rather pathetic."

"I think he's rather bloody-minded. How long has he been living there?"

"According to Em, Dr Piers adopted him about ten years ago. He was an orphan. His mother was dead, and his father, who'd been Dr. Piers' closest friend, was killed in the war."

"But Dr. Piers waited till 1950 to adopt him?"

"Presumably his mother was alive till then. What about Harold? I didn't have any talk with him after dinner."

"I'm not sure about Harold. I don't much go for the City smoothie type He's quite agreeable. But I'd say he was out for Number 1 every time, which includes that expensive wife of his."

"Expensive?"

"Her clothes cost a lot. And drugs don't come cheap."

"Drugs! How do you know?"

"She told me. Unwittingly, of course The question is, would Harold be *anxious* about his father? Anxious enough to come and consult me? He'd something on his mind that night. At a guess, I'd say he would come if it was thoroughly inconvenient for him for his father to be missing"

"In other words?"

"If, for example, his business, whatever it is, was badly in the red, and he needed a large loan, without interest."

"Well, I must say, that's a low view to take of a harmless young man."

"Speculation, in *his* field, can be a good deal worse than idle. There's the telephone."

It was neither Harold nor Graham Loudron speaking. Rebecca Loudron asked if she might bring Walter Barn that evening and have a talk with Nigel.

"So much," remarked Clare when she had given him the message, "for Mr. Nigel Know-All Strangeways."

They received their visitors in the studio, at one end of which were comfortable chairs and a cozy-stove The fog, seeping in, slightly blurred the hard outlines of Clare's Female Nude, round which Walt Barn began to circulate, in the obsessive manner of a dog inspecting a lamppost, the moment he entered. Whether it was her well-cut tweeds, or the presence of emergency, or merely the absence of her father, Rebecca Loudron looked more mature, more integrated.

"It's very good of you to let us come, Mr. Strangeways."

"Not a bit. Have some armagnac with your coffee Warm you up"

"Thank you, perhaps I will. How beautifully warm your studio is, though. Our house has been quite perishing since this fog started. It really needs central heating. But Papa never seems to feel the cold. Walter, do stop prowling round that statue."

"First things first, Becky love." Walter Barn was lying on the floor, gazing upward at the rear elevation of the towering figure. Leaping to his feet, he smoothed the air behind it with his hand. "Nice job, Miss Massinger. *Very* nice. But I'm not sure about this plane here. Won't you have to modify it a bit in relation to—"

"Oh, *Walt!* Do *please* attend!" There was exasperation, but something like tearfulness too, in Rebecca's voice.

Walter came over at once and, taking the glass of armagnac Nigel offered him, sat down on the arm of Rebecca's chair

"I honestly don't know if we ought to bother you with this," she said "James wouldn't approve, I'm sure. But I can't just sit about doing nothing And after what you told us at dinner—I mean—"

"They've mislaid their dad," said Walter.

"Yes, I know," Clare put in soothingly. "We heard about it from Em, our char."

"You see, Papa's never done this before—just going off without telling

anyone. There are his patients. Of course, James can manage them for a bit. But—"

"Let's start at the beginning," said Nigel gently. By tactful questioning, he elicited Rebecca's story.

Yesterday morning she had brought her father's breakfast on a tray to his bedroom, as she normally did, at nine o'clock. He was not there. She went into his study, then called out for him on each floor of the house, but got no answer She thought he must have gone out early on an emergency call, though she had not heard the house telephone. However, at ten o'clock Dr Pier's secretary, Miss Anson, had come in from the annex, where he and Dr. James had their consulting rooms, to say that two of Dr. Piers' patients were waiting, he had not yet come into the consulting room that morning, Miss Anson said. James Loudron had already gone out on his rounds, so Rebecca went to look for Graham, whom she found at breakfast in the dining room.

"I told him Papa couldn't be found Graham said, 'Oh, nonsense. He's probably overslept for once.' I said he wasn't in his bedroom; I'd looked. Well, Graham and I hunted through every room in the house. Then I thought I'd look in the bedroom again. Papa sleeps on the mezzanine floor, above the annex His bedroom and bathroom are the only rooms on that floor Of course, he wasn't there Then Graham said we'd better just try the bathroom, in case Papa had fainted in the bath or something. So he went through the bedroom into the bathroom, and then he called out, 'He's not here.' It gave me quite a shock I suppose I'd keyed myself up to finding him there. By this time Graham was terribly worried. So we got Miss Anson to phone round and contact James and tell him to come home." Rebecca smiled wryly "Poor Papa. He loathed that word 'contact ' "

James Loudron had at first pooh-poohed the idea that anything was wrong. But when his father was still absent eight hours later, he rang the police. The sergeant who came after dinner went straight to the point. He asked them if any hand luggage was missing. They went up to the box room with him. All Dr. Piers' bags and suitcases and their own were still there. So it did not look as if the old doctor had gone off on a journey. His car was in the garage, and a telephone inquiry at the station, where he was well known, confirmed that he had not taken a train The sergeant next asked them to look through Dr Piers' clothes. Here they were in some difficulty, for their father was a dressy man and had a large number of suits, and none of his children could be sure whether or no one of these was missing. The suit he had worn at dinner the previous night was folded neatly on a chair in the bedroom, with shirt, underclothes, socks, and evening slippers to hand,

just as the old man had taken them off when he retired early after dinner, saying that he felt sleepy. The only garment of his that they could identify with certainty as missing was a thick Connemara-tweed overcoat of a distinctive black-and-white pattern.

"Of course he must have taken a suit," said Walter now. "He'd not have walked out into this bloody fog wearing nothing but an overcoat."

Throughout this recital, Nigel had been sitting gazing non-committally down his nose and apparently quite relaxed, even when he asked Rebecca some pertinent question to fill out the picture. In fact, he was giving the concentrated attention, both to fact and to nuances of tone, that was one of his most formidable powers as an investigator. Clare said, smiling at Rebecca, "Strangeways is a human tape recorder, you know Every word you've said is now printed on his mind."

Rebecca gave a nervous laugh. "Oh, I wish I could *do* something!" she cried

"You can. There's one thing that seems to have been overlooked," said Nigel.

"What's that?"

"The diary At dinner the other night, your father told us he'd started to keep a diary. It might tell us why he has disappeared."

"Oh, *yes!* I never thought of that." Rebecca's large brown eyes were staring intently at Nigel. "I'll start looking for it tomorrow."

"Let me get this clear in my mind. You say your father felt sleepy and retired to bed about 8:45 P.M This was unusually early for him?"

"Yes. He generally stayed up till 10 30 at least."

"Did he seem worried at dinner? Absent-minded? Jumpy? In any way not his usual self?"

There was a slight pause Then Rebecca said, "The sergeant asked us that. And the inspector who came yesterday. And, well—" she broke off. Nigel was aware of Walter Barn's bright blue eyes fixed almost hypnotically upon her.

"Why do you hesitate?" he prompted.

"Well, we didn't seem to agree. I mean, I thought Papa was distrait at dinner. But James said he thought he was sulking, and Graham said *his* impression was that Papa was waiting for something."

"Waiting?"

"Yes. I know it sounds odd. 'Waiting for something to happen,' Graham said. He couldn't explain it to the police better than that."

"It happened, all right," said Walter, making Rebecca visibly wince.

"And that was the last any of you saw or heard of him? When he went up to his bedroom?"

"Yes. I wouldn't have heard anything, anyway. I was in my room—it's on the top floor—playing gramophone records. And James had to go out immediately after dinner to a confinement." Rebecca related this rapidly, in her rather monotonous voice, as though reciting a lesson she had learned by heart—as she probably had, thought Nigel, after two interviews with the police.

"And Graham?" he asked.

"He didn't hear anything, either. He was pottering about in his room It's on the first floor." A strange expression fleeted over her face. "It used to be Mother's."

Rising, Nigel gave them some more armagnac. "Well, I don't honestly think I can do much to help at this stage. The police will have put their organization to work; they notify hospitals and so on about persons missing. The main thing is to find that diary."

"There is one thing you might be able to tell us about." Walter Barn's round head, the shaggy hair falling in a fringe over his brow, looked like a lichen-covered stone ball on a gatepost. "The money. What are the arrangements over the money?"

"Household expenses, you mean? I suppose Dr James will get power of attorney if his father's absence is at all protracted."

"Look. I'm just a blunt, proletarian painter Pardon if my vulgar mind's showing, but if the old man never does turn up, when is the loot distributed?"

Even Rebecca looked rather shocked at this brashness, and Walter evidently felt the antipathy he had aroused It made him the more aggressive. "It's all very well for you people, rolling in it, to turn up your delicate noses when money is mentioned It's a dirty word—I know, I know Just tell that to a family of six, like mine was, living in two rooms—"

"Walt! Please! This really isn't necessary."

"Shut up, woman! Don't you want to get married?"

Nigel interposed firmly. "When a person disappears, his will cannot be proved till the lawyers have established presumption of death There's no reason whatsoever for supposing that Miss Loudron's father is—"

"Got all the answers, hasn't he, Becky?" Walter grinned at her. "Well then, Strangeways, if—just *if*—the old boy doesn't show up again, how long does it take to establish this what-d'you-call-it?"

"A period of seven years has to elapse, I believe "

"*Years?* Jesus Christ!"

"A great deal of investigation has to be done."

"So he could keep Becky on the bread line long *after* he's dead? That'd be like him."

The young woman's eyes were suffused with tears. She tried to speak, but her voice failed and she could only gaze at Walter imploringly He disregarded it.

"All right. I wanted to marry Becky. He couldn't stand me at any price. Fair enough. I make barely enough to live on by myself. Her dad told her if she married me he'd stop her allowance—and a right miserable allowance it is, too. What riles me is that the old man should be able to vanish into thin air—if you can call this bloody fog thin air—and still keep her on a ball and chain like he's done all her life. I don't see what's wrong in—"

"There's nothing wrong in taking thought for the future," Clare cut in, her high, light voice like drops of ice. The sight of Rebecca, openly weeping now, had broken her own self-control. "What's wrong is bellyaching about all this and making Rebecca miserable at the very time she needs your sympathy and support most."

"Huh! The women getting together," Walter jeered.

"Don't talk like an oaf!"

"I'm talking honestly. We don't wrap things up in cellophane—not where I come from."

Clare's eyes blazed. Her long black hair swirled like smoke on a gusty day as she turned upon him. "To hell with where you come from! Do you think there's some virtue in bad manners and moronic insensitivity? Does your being working class give you a permit to behave like a bloody-minded little clown? No, you wait, young Walt Barn, I've not finished with you. People like you make me sick. You boast of your poverty and your slum origins; you behave as if they gave you a divine dispensation from showing ordinary human decency. I'm just a plain, blunt proletarian painter, so I don't have to think about anyone else's feelings Van Gogh was uncouth, van Gogh was a genius; therefore I'll show them I'm a genius by behaving uncouthly. Lovely logic, isn't it? Exhibitionism as the short cut to success, eh?"

"Here, I never—"

Clare galloped on over him. "The trouble with you and your lot is that you don't have any values except success. That's why you'll do anything for publicity, and when you get it, you can't take it; it goes to your heads. You're just a rabble of overgrown Peter Pans posturing as roughhewn geniuses or noble martyrs to society. You yourself can at least paint. But you'll never make a good painter till you've learned that the artist must be anony-

mous. So for God's sake stop splashing your virility over everyone and keep it for your canvases."

Clare paused, if only to regain breath.

"How dare you talk to Walter like that?" cried Rebecca. "How *dare* you?"

"Take it easy, old girl I can defend myself," said Walter. He turned to Nigel with a rueful grin "Proper spitfire you've got there. Haven't had such a dressing down since Mum found me in the back yard with the local tart. Mind you, I wouldn't take all that from any old stone-chipper. But Clare Massinger has a right to talk. And she's talked a fair bit of sense, I reckon. I'm sorry if I upset you, Becky love, but next time I do, just throw the kitchen stove at me, like Miss Massinger here."

When they had left, a few minutes later, Nigel mopped his brow. "Good for you, Clare. But it was hot while it lasted "

"I hope I wasn't too rough on him He's not a bad sort He took it pretty well, I must say."

"Yes," said Nigel, a bit dubiously He had seen what Clare had been too wound up to notice—a very ugly glint in the mercurial Walt Barn's eye at one point of her tirade.

3. *A WIND FROM THE NORTHEAST*

Six days later—it was a Saturday—Nigel awoke early with the vague sensation that some change had occurred since he went to sleep. His attention focused drowsily upon the curtains. They were no longer, as they had been every morning for over a week, gray-black rectangles backed by the blanketing fog outside; they glowed, and a strip of dazzling gold showed between them. Getting up, he parted them and looked out. Sunlight. Trees in the park waving their branches. A clear, cold, gray-blue sky. The claustrophobic hood of fog had been lifted away during the night by a wind that was tugging straight in his direction the white ensign over the Naval College. A northeaster.

Dressing quietly so as not to waken Clare, he went out. High up the hill here, the wind drilled into his right eye and numbed the cheekbone below it. Presently he was passing the Loudrons' house. In the sunlight, the white paint of its windows and noble portico looked as if they had just been hosed down. Whatever its secret might be, the house was keeping it, no trace of its owner had been discovered since he disappeared eight days before—not even the diary, which might have explained the aberration, the despair, the stratagem—whatever it was that had taken him out to be swallowed up alive in the fog.

Alive? One had to presume so The local D.D.I., with whom Nigel had got in touch through the medium of Chief Detective-Inspector Wright at Scotland Yard, assured him that they had given Number 6 a discreet going over, and there was no evidence whatsoever of its owner's having left the house dead. Radio and newspaper appeals had produced the usual crop of eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen Dr. Piers Loudron in a variety of places, from Deptford to Barrow-on-Furness, and the usual handful of harmless lunatics who eagerly confessed to having murdered him. These had all been sieved out, and nothing material was left in the mesh. If indeed he had suffered an attack of amnesia, he would probably be dead by now—of starvation, for his wallet was in the pocket of the suit he had taken off that night, he had drawn no money from a bank since his disappearance, and no hospitals or casual wards had taken him in.

He might just conceivably have been kidnaped. But why? And why should the kidnapers remain silently undemanding?

The local police, faced by this blind wall of negatives, were inclined to think that he must have left the house that night and fallen, either accidentally or on purpose, into the river. The Connemara-tweed overcoat was, after all, missing, and it was not altogether inconceivable that, in a state of mental derangement, the old man should put on no other clothing to walk out of the house to his death. Late at night or in the early hours of the morning, the fog being so thick, he could easily have got to the river, three minutes' walk from his house, unobserved. But the fog, clamped down on the river day after day, had prevented any effective testing of this theory.

As Nigel strode into the High Road, the clock on St. Alfege's church said twenty-five past seven Unconsciously he quickened his pace. The river seemed to be drawing him toward it. The bodies of the drowned, made buoyant by the gases of their putrefaction, rise slowly to float on the surface again after six to ten days. It was now the eighth day since Dr. Piers Loudron had vanished, and the first of clear visibility.

All the way down the hill, Nigel had been hearing the steam whistles of ships, released from the fog's thrall, making their way upstream or downstream round the U bend of the Isle of Dogs As he turned left out of Nelson Parade, he saw the derricks, mast, high bridge structure, and funnel of a vessel sliding past the pier. High tide, or something near it. The air thrummed with a vibration of many engines, and was impregnated with familiar river smells—diesel oil, mud, tar, rotting detritus, chemical fumes —a sour amalgam of smells blown inland by the wind, which had a taste of salt in it too The pier turnstile gates would be padlocked still. Nigel walked past the great brown-black hull of the "Cutty Sark," under the towering tracery of its three masts and rigging, onto the railed space to the left of the pier. Early workers were pouring into the domed building that housed the lift that would take them down to the tunnel beneath the Thames; they would push their bicycles along its quarter mile of white-tiled walls, while tugs, coasters, cargo liners thrashed their way overhead.

Leaning on the rail and looking left, Nigel watched a huge, blue-funnelled Swedish cargo liner, in ballast, being maneuvered away from its moorings opposite Deptford creek by two "Sun"-class tugs, whose raked smokestacks and squat hulls, dwarfed by the Swede's tremendous hulk, gave them a prissy, self-important air Hugging the far bank to avoid the full thrust of the ebb, three deep-waisted Dutch family ships followed one another upriver, their motors pulsing heavily. The wash of passing vessels slopped lumps of water up the stone steps between Nigel and the domed building, from which Graham Loudron at this moment emerged and

walked rapidly away What could the young man have been doing across the river at this hour of the morning, Nigel wondered.

He himself now moved off toward the Naval College In the right angle formed by the river wall beyond the pier, an old man was leaning over the iron railing and gazing lugubriously down at the water. Nigel stopped beside him. The water was covered with a sluggishly heaving carpet of debris, driven here by the northeast wind—packing cases, bales of hay, tins of polish, halves of grapefruit, a dead cat, a gym shoe, a motor tire, and thousands of pieces of wood; timbers big enough to have been the stern-posts of vanished sailing ships, planks from Scandinavian sawmills, a mass of smaller lengths like kindling wood, all jostled together in a sort of flexuous, sodden mosaic that, like oil on water, subdued the waves made by passing ships and by the wind blowing diagonally across the tide.

"All that wood," said the lugubrious man, spitting copiously into it. "Floats down the river. The it floats up again. Backward and forward. Year after year. Makes you think, Guv, don't it?"

"What I can't understand," said Nigel, "is why the whole river isn't blocked by it, like pack ice Where does all the rest of the wood go? Year after year, for centuries, people have been chucking wood into the river, it's been falling off ships and barges, floating out from wharves. And it doesn't sink for ages. It ought to have choked up the river long ago."

"Time," remarked his companion, "like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away."

"Yes, but—"

"Funny tricks this old river plays," said the man, sucking his mustache. "Bloke I knew, years ago, got knocked in one night making fast a German ship at Grunton's Wharf. Couldn't swim. 'E just went under, like a bit of bleeding pig iron. Grunton's Wharf's on this side of the river, beyond the power station." The old man pointed east "Now, Guv, where d'you reckon they'd find the corpse?"

Nigel gave the problem his full attention. "Depends what the state of the tide was when he fell in."

"Top of the ebb. Like now, as it might be."

"Well, I suppose the ebb might pull him out, along the river bottom. But the current round the Isle of Dogs has a strong southerly thrust at the bend there, so he'd be bound to get pushed back to this bank, wouldn't he?"

"That's what you'd think," replied the old man with relish. "But they found him, couple of weeks later, over there." He jerked his head toward the Luralda Wharf, on the far side of the river. "Nobody couldn't account

for it. Might've been an eddy; he could have got into the outflow from the power station. Some said suction."

"Suction?"

"Screws of all them vessels passing. Pull you out toward them, see? Mash you up too Old Bert was mashed up something horrible."

"In the midst of life, we are in death."

"You bloody said it, Guv." His faded eyes gazed dreamily at Nigel. "Ah. Old Father Thames. 'E's sly, all right. You've got to watch him. Mate of mine—he was master of a tug . . ."

After hearing another mortuary reminiscence, Nigel bade the old longshoreman good morning and walked on past the Naval College, its gray stone gleaming in the sunshine, to the far end of the esplanade. Here, in the shallow inlet by the Trafalgar Tavern, another carpet of flotsam sullenly heaved. On the black wall beneath the building a high-water mark showed, only two feet below the little balcony of the central ground-floor window. It occurred to Nigel that at high water a body could be put into the river from such a window with hardly a splash. Gazing unseeingly at the wooden jetty of the Curlew rowing club, he did a sum in his head. High water today was at about 6 A.M. On the night Dr. Piers Loudron had disappeared, high tide must have been around 10 P.M., and by 11 P.M. the ebb would have been running strongly.

He walked round the back of the Trafalgar Tavern, along Crane Street, and past Holy Trinity Hospital, the seventeenth-century almshouse over whose toylike façade towered the chimneys of the power station; then under the clattering conveyors of the power station, through a scrap-iron yard, to emerge again on the river front opposite the "Cutty Sark" pub At a wharf just beyond, partly hidden by a wall, a green flag with "Wreck" lettered upon it fluttering from the mast, lay a Thames sailing barge This must be the one that Harold Loudron had bought some years ago Nigel peered round the wall, from which the bows of the barge projected. The bulwarks were broken off in places. A section of the deck planking amidships was gone, revealing a turgid compost of mud and water in the hold. The wheel, unlashed, made half turns as the waves thumped the great rudder, whose banging was answered by a kind of hollow, distant thunder, like the sound of the skittle game in "Rip Van Winkle," as the swell bumped together a row of empty lighters moored side by side at Lovell's Wharf.

Just beyond this barge, there showed the roof and upper story of a house, the rest concealed by the high wall. A door in the wall gave access to it; the front of the house must be right over the river. "Between the 'Cutty Sark'

pub and Lovell's Wharf," Harold Loudron had told him. It was certainly a strange place for the Loudrons to live in—the dapper young City gent and his exotic, restless wife—here amongst the racket of riveting, the grime from the power station, the hissing roar of oxyacetylene burners in the scrapyard. They had the pub handy, and a glorious view down the reach past the Isle of Dogs. But otherwise the situation seemed quite out of character for both of them. No doubt, thought Nigel, it had seemed "amusing" at first: a new sensation for Sharon, and, of course, they got a rent-free house—it had belonged to Harold's mother—but the novelty must have worn off pretty soon.

Sirens blew from across the Thames. Eight o'clock. Nigel began to retrace his steps, hungry for breakfast From Ballast Quay he saw a police launch on patrol approaching upriver from the direction of the West India docks, a white mustache of foam bristling at its bows He came out again on the esplanade by the Trafalgar Tavern. A white-hulled Spanish steamer, of graceful outlines, was gliding eastward Between this vessel and the shore, a pack of sea gulls screamed and skidded in the air, circling over some debris. As Nigel took out his field glasses and began to focus them, the police launch emerged from behind a collier unloading at the powerhouse jetty, and its bows lifted to the acceleration of its powerful engine. The river police had seen what Nigel too was looking at now, clear in the circle of his binoculars—the thing he had not come out this early morning with the least expectation of seeing, yet which, the moment he set eyes on it, made him feel that it had been waiting for him all these days to come out and find it, directing his steps this way like a destiny—a hulk of flesh, waterlogged and dirty white, screamed over by gulls, lumbering and sliding with other flotsam on the choppy river.

The launch stopped on the leeward side of the body, obscuring Nigel's view. On its afterdeck, behind the cabin, two policemen got busy, one with a boat hook, the other with a coil of rope Wind and tide swinging the launch round, Nigel was shortly able to observe their catch. As it was hauled aboard, the rope noosed beneath its arms, the torso stood upright for a moment on the water Decay and long immersion had bloated the face almost out of recognition, the swollen tongue protruded from blubber lips in a grimace; the ruined eyes were smears of white Only the silver-white of hair and beard suggested that this could be the remains of the elegant, vivacious Dr. Piers Loudron

The policemen hauled again, their faces tight with repugnance. As the body slid over the gunwale, Nigel saw that it had no legs. The policemen

laid it on deck, putting a tarpaulin over it, and the launch kicked into full speed.

Nigel took a few steps homeward; then, on an impulse, he turned round and hurried back toward Harold Loudron's house. The door in the wall was not locked. He passed through, across a small yard; hammered on the front door, rang the bell several times. At last Harold Loudron appeared, in a cardinal-red dressing gown, his black hair disheveled.

"What the devil? Oh, it's you. Has something happened?"

"Can I come in a minute?"

Harold led the way into a sitting room, which ran the length of the house, with three tall sash windows overlooking the river. Nigel sat down on a window seat cushioned with red leather The room was paneled with birch, unpainted, and at one end of it was a dining alcove divided from the rest by a movable glass partition. Brilliant Mexican mats adorned the pearwood floor. It all looked singularly like a model for gracious, modernistic living out of an Ideal Home exhibition, except for the dust which lay thick on rubber plants, tables, and shelves—a general air of *tristesse* and seediness, which gave it the pathos of a room in an expensive dollhouse neglected by some spoiled child.

"I think your father has been found," said Nigel.

Harold Loudron stared at him a moment, in what looked very like consternation. Then his eyes lit up (artificial lighting? Nigel wondered).

"Found! Oh, but that's splendid. Thank God! We were—"

"I'm sorry. Not alive. I've just seen a body taken out of the river. I'm afraid it's very likely his."

"Oh, God! How awful!" Harold lit a cigarette shakily; then, remembering his manners, offered his gold case to Nigel and said, "Good of you to tell us. You know, in a way it's a sort of relief. We'd been worrying terribly. The suspense, you know."

A relief it certainly was, of some kind, judging by the relaxation of Harold's tense body.

"I thought you might like to ring up your brothers straightway—break it to them before the police. Sometimes the police are a bit heavy-handed about—"

"Yes, of course. I'm really most grateful to—"

He broke off. Had he been on the point of saying "most grateful to your good self"? The meaningless, vulgar businessman's jargon would come naturally to him, thought Nigel.

"It's a great shock," said Harold Loudron "I can hardly take it in yet. My father was a fine man. Greatly beloved. And so full of life."

Harold seemed well launched upon a Rotarian-type oration, which would be more than Nigel could take on an empty stomach.

"Hadn't you better telephone?"

"Quite." But still Harold made no move. "You say—where did you see—er—the body being—"

"Just beyond the Trafalgar Tavern It had no legs."

"What had no legs?" came a husky voice from the door. Sharon had slashed on some lipstick, but her puffy face and bedroom hair were not prepossessing

"Darling, you shouldn't have—Strangeways has very kindly looked in to—you must prepare yourself for a shock, I'm afraid." Harold dithered round his wife in an uxorious manner that evidently tried her patience.

"They've found him, you mean?" she asked, coughing harshly.

Nigel told what he had seen. "Of course, I can't be absolutely certain But it had white hair and a white beard. And it was the right build. We shall know soon."

Sharon threw back her tangled red mane from over her eyes.

"But what's this about no legs?" she asked

"He must have been caught by a ship's propeller."

Sharon took three long, graceful strides to a kidney-shaped chair and sat down.

"Well, he wouldn't have felt it."

"Sharon! *Darling!*" Harold protested.

"Well, he was dead, wasn't he? Drowned, I mean, before that?"

"I presume so," said Nigel. "And drowning is a good deal more painful than—"

"My wife only meant that she was glad he didn't suffer—er—from what you say happened later." Harold spoke quite stuffily. He's still besotted with this beautiful harpy of his, thought Nigel, glancing out of the window. Waves spanked the river wall directly below it; five or six feet below. A tug, dirty-white foam piled at its blunt bows and four empty lighters in tow, approached up the reach. It hooted four times, then twice.

"Ninety-degree turn to port," said Harold absently.

"Sailor boy!" Sharon's voice was mildly satirical. She turned her diminished green eyes upon Nigel. "He'll run away to sea one day if he isn't careful."

"Well, I'd better go and telephone," said Harold doubtfully. No one gainsaying him, he went. Sharon at once slipped over to occupy the window seat beside Nigel. Her wrap fell open, and a waft of warm flesh smell came from her.

"This is going to upset poor old brother James," she said

"Him particularly?"

"Becky will *feel* upset. But actually it'll be a merciful release for her. But James—he's been shaking in his shoes. The practice. What'll the patients say? The senior partner committing suicide. Oh dear, oh dear!"

"What makes you think Dr. Piers committed suicide?"

"Well, what else could it be?" Her eyes held his in a long, calculating look; there was a sort of excitement in them too. "You don't mean—what they call 'foul play'?"

"Or accident. Who knows? I see it'll be awkward for James, though, whatever it turns out to be. And Graham?"

Her eyes filmed over. "What about him?"

"Will *he* be very upset? I got the impression he was the favorite son."

"It would take an earthquake to upset young Graham," she murmured, frowning a little.

"Which brings us to Harold."

"I suppose it does. But what's all this in aid of? Why should you worry which of us is worried? Not that those anxious wrinkles on your forehead aren't rather fascinating."

"You and Harold will be glad of the money, I imagine."

For a moment Nigel thought she was going to claw at his face with those blood-red nails of hers. But she controlled herself, digging them into the palms of her hands instead, and replied, in a sort of husky purr, "Yes, we shall. For one thing, we can get out of this dreary dump."

"You don't like it? I think it's rather a romantic house."

"So did I, once," she said bitterly. "Of course, your generation were suckers for romance, weren't you?"

Romance? thought Nigel. The distressed areas, the hunger marchers, the new barbarism of tin-pot Tamerlanes? "And your lot is clear-eyed, disillusioned, realistic? The I'm-all-right-Jack brigade?"

"We only live once. Why the hell shouldn't we enjoy ourselves?"

"Why not? Only it seems to make you either bored or bad-tempered. But perhaps you enjoy *that.*"

Sharon smiled a secret smile, her eyes glittering. She had roused this impassive man; the only antagonism she recognized was sex antagonism, to her the first sign of sexual interest.

"Not all the time," she said. "Tell me, are you a one-woman man?"

"I never consider propositions before breakfast."

Sharon gasped, as if he had punched her. "You're damned insulting, I must say."

"I thought you were against the romantic approach."

She looked at him consideringly. Then, leaning back so that her collarbones stood out in ridges, she said, "Shall I give you breakfast here?"

"Why not?" said Harold Loudron, entering. "Do stay, won't you, Strangeways? We could ring up your house and tell them—"

"It's very kind of you, but I'd better be off."

Sharon gave him a hot, dry hand. As he went out, he felt her gaze upon his back, tenacious as brambles across a path.

4. *UNKINDEST CUTS*

Next morning, after breakfast, Nigel walked down to the Loudrons' house. James Loudron had telephoned him the night before, asking him to come. A Sunday quiet was over the town. In the Park a few people walked, exercising their dogs; bits of paper blew about the road as Nigel came to the bottom of the hill, his mind at grips with the pathologist's report, the gist of which the D D.I. had passed on to him the previous evening. It was a report that made the death of Dr. Piers even more mysterious and bizarre than his disappearance.

Dr. James brought him into a room on the left of the hall—a square room, its paneled walls painted with graining and knots to resemble stripped wood, a large desk in the middle, and bookshelves built into the alcoves on either side of the fireplace.

"This was my father's study."

Nigel commented on the paneling.

"Yes. My mother had it done for him. Not long before she died As a present for his birthday." James Loudron's heavy face was bleak with some unhappy reminiscence He paused, then jerked out, "He didn't really like it at all."

"No?"

"He could be very cutting I suppose I oughtn't to say that, but—"

"I can imagine," ventured Nigel, "he was not altogether easy to live with."

"My mother was a saint," James blurted out; then, as if aware that along this line he might quickly go too far, he twitched his ponderous shoulders and said, "We're in rather a spot, you know"

"The pathologist's findings?"

"You've heard about that? Yes I've not told the others yet The fact is—I don't quite know how to approach this—"

"You'd like me to help? Professionally?"

"That's it." James seemed absurdly relieved "Sort of friend at court You told us at dinner you sometimes took on this sort of thing."

"Certainly. But I must make it quite clear that I don't work *against* the police."

James looked quite shocked "Of course. I should be the last person to

ask you to compound a felony, or whatever it's called. Not," he added hastily, "that there can be any question of a felony here. I mean, in the sense of—" He spluttered to a stop, like a car with a choked petrol feed. Nigel tactfully helped him out, then asked if he could talk to all the members of the family together. James went out to collect them and ring up Harold.

Pompous, earnest, socially inept, humorless, single-minded; overshadowed by his father, but likely to blossom out now the shadow is removed, and become with greater self-confidence a more than adequate practitioner; devoted to his mother, and probably resented his father's treatment of her; is appalled—as he and everyone else keep drumming into my head—by the possible effect of the tragedy upon his practice, but would this be sufficient to account for the terrible uneasiness that he so ineffectually tries to conceal? Uneasiness? Or bewilderment?

Dragging himself out of these sterile meditations, Nigel began to prowl about the room. The books told him little he did not know about Dr. Piers' refined taste; there were two shelves of art books, an array of biography, a good selection of classics and modern novelists, little poetry. The medical textbooks were kept, presumably, in the surgery. The drawers of the leather-topped desk were not locked; they had been left open, no doubt, after the search for the missing diary.

It was this diary that most exercised Nigel's mind just now Either Dr. Piers had started writing it or for some unimaginable reason he had told a lie when he said he was keeping a diary. If there had been a diary, four possibilities arose: either Dr. Piers had destroyed it himself or hidden it, or someone else had destroyed it or was hiding it. It seemed unlikely that Dr Piers could have hidden it so successfully as to elude a search by his own family. Did he destroy it, then? Surely he would do so only if it contained matter he did not wish to be made public after his death, which implied that, after his announcement at the dinner party, he somehow became aware that he was shortly going to be dead, which implied suicide. And suicide, as the pathologist's report showed, was almost (but not quite) out of the question Well, then, had some member of the household destroyed it? A murderer, because it gave him away? Possible, but the diary might also have been destroyed, after the doctor's disappearance, by one of the family, either to protect a murderer or merely to get rid of something that would prove embarrassing to himself if it were exposed. The fourth alternative—that one of the household was concealing it—implied that the diary was dangerous or embarrassing to him at present, but later might become use-

ful. Useful for blackmail? For self-defense? For the vindication of someone or something?

Nigel turned his mind to something less ambiguous. The physical diary itself. What would Dr. Piers be likely to write in? He was the kind of man who might well have bought a sumptuous, tooled-leather article. But also, Nigel's intuition told him, the old man might equally well have started jotting down—how had he put it?—"not exactly for confession but for the drawing up of a balance sheet"—on the first paper that came handy. And what would come handy for a doctor? A prescription pad? Too small for the purpose. A casebook? Yes, thought Nigel excitedly, and that could account for why the diary had not been found: a doctor's casebooks are top secret; even his own family would feel inhibited from prying into them—Rebecca, certainly, if it had been she who did the searching. Presumably the subsequent search by the police would have covered the surgery, but by that time the casebook, with its diary pages, might have been taken away and concealed. It should be simple enough to find out, from an inspection of Dr. Piers' records, whether one of his casebooks was missing

A car drew up outside—a Jaguar—from which Harold Loudron emerged. Letting himself in at the front door, he called out for James, who ran downstairs and took Nigel and Harold up to the drawing room. In the morning sunshine its white-paneled walls, the brilliant pictures, and the exquisite blending of colors in carpet and hangings and upholstery, together with the figures of Rebecca, Graham, and Walter Barn, who were sitting there like people in a painter's conversation piece, all made it resemble a distinguished salon. Even Walt Barn had, somewhat surprisingly, got himself into a Sunday suit. And it was not only the sunlit room itself, so gracious and airy, that gave Nigel the impression of a lightening—an atmosphere easier to breathe, as it were, than it had been that night after dinner when the presence of the patriarchal Dr. Loudron had overcast the assembly.

James, leaning his elbow on the mantelshelf and clumsily stuffing a pipe, told them he had asked for Nigel's help, then, with a brusque gesture, handed over to him. After offering his condolences, Nigel turned to Rebecca.

"Your brother and I have heard the gist of the pathologist's report. It won't be very pleasant to listen to If you'd rather—"

"No. Please tell us everything," she said, with a lift of her chin and a steady look at Nigel. There was a new, unconscious dignity in her bearing, though her eyes were heavy with grief or sleeplessness. "I am a doctor's daughter," she added.

"Well, then. The medical evidence is consistent with your father's having died on the night he disappeared. But it does not rule out his dying up to two days later. The cause of death is not absolutely established."

"But surely—wasn't he drowned?" Graham Loudron's expressionless eyes were fixed attentively upon Nigel's.

"No. His body was found in the river, as you know. It had been badly mutilated by the screw of a steamer. But, fortunately for this investigation, it was his legs and not his arms that were cut off."

Nigel paused as he stood by one of the tall windows, closely scrutinizing the five of them. They all looked—or managed to look—blankly puzzled

"The Inspector—he came twice yesterday—didn't tell us that," said Rebecca.

"He told me—in confidence," said James.

"Why," asked Graham, "is this fortunate for the investigation?"

"Because the arteries of both wrists were severed," Nigel flatly replied.

"Then he did commit suicide," said Harold, almost to himself.

Walter Barn cocked up his round head. "But that's fantastic. D'you mean the old man walked down to the river, through that fog, in nothing but an overcoat, and cut his wrists and threw himself in—all in one motion, like?"

James coughed—in embarrassment or warningly.

"We don't know for certain," Rebecca put in, "that there wasn't a suit missing, and underclothes."

"He must have had a brain storm," Harold said. "That's the only thing that would account for it."

"Yes, but the clothes, the overcoat—" began Walter.

"The body was naked. But they could easily have been ripped off by the ship's propeller and shredded. Or they may yet be found " Nigel stopped, and began to prowl along the length of the three windows. "How he got into the water, we simply don't know. But he was certainly dead by then, the autopsy proves it. You agree?"

"Yes. No doubt at all," said James, with a worried frown.

Nigel paused again, to see if anyone would take up the running. At last Harold Loudron hesitantly remarked, "I don't see it's all that improbable. Couldn't he have gone to the river—assuming some kind of brain storm—and severed the arteries, and then fallen in in a faint, or—or decided to finish himself off by jumping in?"

Rebecca gave a little sob

"The trouble with that theory," said Nigel, "is that no bloodstains have been found, and the nature of the cuts."

All but James, who was nodding sapiently, gazed at Nigel perplexed. He felt a tightening of tension in the room, but could not tell who was its source. Someone—or more than one—had keyed himself up at that "nature of the cuts."

"Yes," he went on. "You see, there are only two cuts, and they are of an equal depth."

Graham Loudron rose abruptly to his feet, looked around for a cigarette box, took a cigarette and lighted it, and sat down again. At the mantelshelf Dr. James stood, stiff as a caryatid. Walter Barn was feverishly scratching his flaxen poll.

"Could you favor us," asked Graham coldly, "with some explanation? We're not all authorities on forensic medicine here."

"Certainly. Suicides who—I'm sorry to have to go into all these details, Miss Loudron—who cut an artery generally go for the jugular. And they almost invariably make several tentative, exploratory cuts before they give the slash that kills them. Whether this is because they haven't the nerve to do it decisively the first time, or because they are ignorant of anatomy and searching for the exact place—"

"But you can hardly argue," interrupted Graham, "that my father was ignorant of anatomy."

"Indeed not In the case of a doctor *and* a resolute man, the absence of exploratory cuts would mean a good deal less."

"Well, then—"

"It's the *depth* that tells against suicide. Don't you see? Was your father ambidextrous?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"If you are normally right-handed, you would take the razor in your right hand to slash your left wrist This cut would, partly at least, disable your left hand, so that, when you transferred the razor to it, you could not possibly make so deep a cut in the other wrist."

"I see," said Graham woodenly. There was a considerable silence, broken finally by Walter Barn.

"Must've been a gang."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Harold wearily protested.

"No, I'm serious. Suppose he just took it into his head to go for a walk Foggy night. Some ted bumps up against him, demands his wallet. Easy meat. But the old man resists. Puts up his hands, see, to ward off this ted Who slashes at him, cuts both wrists, then dumps him in the river."

"I never heard such a ridiculous notion," drawled Harold "Why on earth should Father go for a walk in the middle of a foggy night?"

"Maybe he went along after dinner to see you and your missus," Walter answered, with an irresponsible grin.

"She wasn't— What the hell d'you mean, to see *us*!" Harold exclaimed violently.

"Well, to see *you*, then. I heard him talking to you on the telephone before dinner that night. 'No, it can't be as urgent as that,' he said. 'We'll discuss it tomorrow.' Maybe he changed his mind and toddled along after all."

Harold was quite white with anger. "Are you suggesting—"

"Let's drop this," interposed James. "My father went to bed early that night."

"People can get out of bed," said Walter.

"But they usually don't when they've taken a sedative," said James.

"A sedative?" Rebecca's eyes were opened wide.

"He told us he was feeling sleepy. A fair amount of a barbiturate has been found in the stomach," said James. "They can't be certain how big the actual dose was. But it would have been enough, at least, to make him very drowsy for several hours."

Walt Barn bobbed up again. "Well, this beats everything! First someone tries to do him with a drug; then he's—"

"This isn't the time or the place for clowning," James heavily rebuked him.

"Anyway, what were you doing here that night?" asked Harold. "It's the first I've heard—"

Walter's bead-bright eyes switched to him. "I just looked in to see Becky. Before dinner. Next question?"

Nigel intercepted a look that Rebecca gave the young painter at this point—a look of reproach, was it? Or distrust? Or apprehension? He decided to take a grip on the situation again.

"The police will have to investigate all your movements that night. Very thoroughly. So I suggest we do not go into them now. But since Dr. James has asked me to hold a watching brief for the family, let me impress on you how important it is to tell them the exact truth. Being evasive, or telling lies with the mistaken object of protecting someone else, would cause endless trouble and confusion."

"Quite. Absolutely," commented James, in an authoritative manner.

"It looks as if you were going to earn your money pretty easily." Graham's small mouth had a cynical twist "And why should the protection of someone else be a mistaken object?"

"Mr Strangeways means that to suppose you can protect a person by

telling lies to the police is a mistake," said Rebecca severely, looking extraordinarily like her mother in the dining-room portrait.

"I stand corrected," Graham murmured. "Perhaps our private and personal investigator can tell us what deduction he draws from the missing razor?"

"Missing razor?" Harold echoed.

"Yes," said Nigel. "Your father stopped shaving years ago, of course But he kept his case of cutthroat razors. According to the Inspector, one is missing from the case, and cannot be found in this house."

"And the deduction?" Graham persisted, in his smooth, acid tone.

"Either Dr. Piers did leave the house, taking the razor, with the intention of using it on himself elsewhere—"

"Tactful, eh?" Walter outrageously muttered.

"—or someone used it on him in this house and disposed of it later, probably in the same way the body was disposed of."

James Loudron broke the shocked silence. "But that would mean—would seem to imply that one of us—it's inconceivable."

"If I used a razor on anyone, I'd simply wipe it off and put it back in the case," said Walter brightly.

"I can just imagine that," remarked Harold.

"Nasty, nasty!"

Rebecca spoke up "I think we ought to try to remember that it's Father who is dead, and not be flippant about it all."

Walter's mouth sprang open, but he managed to hold back whatever unconscionable utterance he had been on the point of making

"Your father kept casebooks, I presume?" Nigel suddenly asked.

"Oh, yes," said James. "In the surgery. In a cupboard he kept locked."

"Miss Loudron, when you searched for the diary, you didn't think of looking in that cupboard?"

"Yes. I did. There was no diary there."

"But you didn't examine the casebooks themselves?"

"Certainly not. They are absolutely confidential."

"Then I think I'd better do so now."

"Oh, no." Rebecca was flustered but exceedingly firm "That is quite out of the question. And in any case I can't see why—"

"Mr. Strangeways," said Graham, looking at him with something nearer respect than he had yet shown, "has it in mind that Father might have used the empty pages of a casebook for his diary "

"Exactly. And if you will not allow me to look through them, there would surely be no breach of professional etiquette in Dr. James doing so? In my

presence, of course?" And it's not hard to see why the intelligent Dr. Piers had a soft spot for Graham Loudron, thought Nigel, when he is evidently so much quicker on the uptake than the others.

"I can see no objection," said James. He knocked out his pipe in the grate, and moved to go, but Graham made a slight gesture.

"Reverting to what you said just now, Strangeways, how can the police suppose that my father was killed in this house? Surely there'd be traces? And also traces of the body's being taken away?"

"They were nosing about in Father's car, and mine, yesterday afternoon," said James grimly.

"They've been all over the house," Rebecca added. "And I suppose they'll be back again soon. I must say they're very polite and give as little trouble as possible."

"Like the bailiffs," said Walter, grinning.

"I'm afraid I'm going to ask if I may do just the same. Perhaps you would show me round"—Nigel smiled at Rebecca—"after your brother and I have visited the surgery."

James took Nigel down some back stairs and unlocked the door into the annex This contained a surgery, a dispensary, and a waiting room. The surgery was a long, cream-washed room, with French windows at the far end opening onto the garden While Dr James unlocked a cupboard and took out a pile of foolscap-size manuscript books, Nigel surveyed the garden. On his left was a full-grown lime tree; in front, a bed filled with rosebushes heavily pruned; beyond that, a square of grass; and at the far end were some terraced beds in which crocuses and snowdrops were showing, backed by the side wall of a house.

"These really ought to go to his old hospital," said James "They're quite exceptional. He was a remarkable diagnostician, you know. It's partly experience, of course, but that isn't enough in itself, one needs intuition, instinct, I don't know what to call it." His voice tailed off, and he began to read at random with an absorbed professional interest.

"Are they dated? Each book, I mean?" Nigel gently asked.

"What? Oh, yes."

"Then try the most recent one first."

Dr James went through the pile, found the 1959 and 1960 volumes, began to glance rapidly through the pages.

"This is a bore for you," he said over his shoulder "Wouldn't you rather go over the house while I'm doing this?"

"I'm sorry, but I must be present. Then no one could accuse you of

destroying the evidence." Nigel's tone was light, but James frowned and twitched his shoulders as if there was a load on them.

"If I'd wanted to destroy evidence, I could have done it any time in the last ten days," he said. "Besides, how do you know I'm going to tell you if I *do* come to the diary pages?"

"Of course you are, because the police will soon be examining those books, and it'd look bad if you missed out something and they found it."

There was nothing in the recent volumes. James worked back, through the nineteen-fifties and nineteen forties. Three quarters of an hour had passed. He came to the book for 1940, flipped his way through it. "Hello! Look. There are some pages missing at the end."

Nigel took the volume from his hands. There were indications that four pages had been roughly removed "So perhaps somebody *has* destroyed the evidence."

"My father could have torn them out himself, I suppose."

"But he wasn't in the habit of taking out pages. None of the books so far have any missing?"

"No."

"Well, carry on Work backward. It may not mean anything."

James finally put down the earliest volume. "Nothing more," he said, sighing heavily. "No diary. No other pages missing."

"Then I'll take the 1940 book and give it to the police. There may be fingerprints Have you some newspaper I can wrap it in? I'll write you a receipt now. And please tell *no one* about what we've found."

Presently Nigel walked out into the garden, the wrapped volume under his arm, to get some fresh air. Forsythia was blooming on the wall to the right of the rose bed. Behind this wall, he discovered, lay a yard with tall wooden doors giving onto Burney Street and the old coach house, which had been converted into a double garage. He strolled to the far end of the garden and gazed unseeingly at the clumps of golden crocuses "Now why," he silently asked them, "why should Dr Piers choose the 1940 book to keep his diary in, supposing those missing pages were a diary? Wouldn't it have been more natural for him to have used the 1960 book, which has any number of blank pages?" The crocuses offered no reply. "What happened in 1940? The first blitzes. His finest hour? Twenty years ago. Does this mean anything, or is it just the alluring mouth of a blind alley?"

Nigel walked slowly back to the house. Rebecca Loudron was waiting for him in her father's study Her eyes at once turned to the parcel under his arm. "Did you find anything?" she asked.

"We didn't find any diary pages, I'm afraid."

Rebecca waited for him to enlarge upon this, but, since he did not, bit her lip in obvious chagrin and rose abruptly. "You want to see over the house now?"

"Yes, please. May we start at the top and work down?"

The top floor consisted in a box room and two others. These two were used for spare rooms, she told him; they used to have maids in them, but servants were difficult to get nowadays and foreign help was often unreliable, so they had been managing lately with a woman to clean and another who came in occasionally to do the cooking if Rebecca was ill or away.

"But you're fond of cooking, yourself, or you wouldn't be so good at it?"

"Oh, yes. But it *is* a tie."

What a strange mixture she is, thought Nigel; so dull and conventional on the surface, and rather childlike—even now it's as if she were *playing* at being the grown-up hostess; yet underneath there is real vitality, something long suppressed, ready to flower—or to explode?

"You'll miss your father very much?" he tentatively inquired.

Her large, almost handsome face closed up. "I don't know. I was used to him At present I feel nothing Just sort of dazed and empty " She paused, struggling to make her thoughts articulate "I suppose we all depended upon him too much. I don't mean just for money "

Rather brusquely, as if she had given herself away, Rebecca led him down to the next floor. "These used to be the nurseries. We turned them into bed-sitting rooms That's a bathroom. James and I share it. And Graham uses it. This is James' room. I'm afraid it's rather untidy; the woman doesn't come today, and I haven't had time to do it yet "

It was a pleasant, low-ceilinged room, its windows looking out onto the street. A smell of stale tobacco hung in the air. The bedclothes were rumpled and wrinkled, as though James had spent a restless night. There was an electric fire, a comfortable armchair, shelves with medical works, detective novels, and travel books meticulously segregated. A cabinet in one corner held a collection of botanical specimens.

Next, they entered Rebecca's own room. Whatever Nigel might have fancied, he would never have guessed it would be like this. A large room, overlooking the garden, low-ceilinged like James', the nursery bars still on the windows, and crammed with old-fashioned furniture—a large four-poster, a frilled dressing table, a round mahogany Victorian table, an array of futile knickknacks on the mantelshelf, daguerreotypes and silhouettes and gloomy landscapes on the walls, two basket chairs and a nursing chair, a thick Turkey carpet, occasional tables littered with photographs in silver frames, bowls of potpourri, nameless objects in poker work—the eye was

surfeited at one glance. Only one contemporary article could be descried amid the chaos: a magnificent phonograph.

"They're all my mother's," said Rebecca, flushing. "Papa wanted to auction them after she died, but he finally let me keep some of her things."

"How old were you then?"

"Eighteen. She died eight years ago."

"So you won that battle, anyway."

"Won—what do you mean?"

"Your father *finally* let you keep some of her things, you said."

Rebecca looked a bit uncomfortable. "Well, yes, it *was* rather a struggle. Of course, I can understand now. He didn't like them—Mother had no taste, I suppose; like me; not his sort of taste, anyway "

"And you were shocked to think he wanted to get rid of every trace of her? One can get tremendously indignant at eighteen."

"One can get tremendously indignant a good deal older than that," she answered, with a sudden dryness that Nigel could imagine as inherited from her Scottish mother.

"Yes," he said. "On one's own behalf. But the passionate, quixotic loyalty that makes one fight for someone else's memory—that's a youthful thing. An admirable thing, too."

Rebecca bowed her head, touched by the oblique praise.

"Is this your mother? May I look?"

"Yes. It was taken on their honeymoon. She looks very happy, doesn't she?"

But the face Nigel was observing in the silver-framed, faded photograph was that of the man who stood beside Mrs. Loudron. Dr. Piers had been clean-shaven in those days, so the lines of his intelligent face, tapering down from broad brow to narrow chin, and the slightly mischievous pout of the little mouth, were unobscured.

"Funny," he said, "your father reminds me of someone."

"Oh? Who?"

"Who can it be? Does it remind *you* of anyone?"

She studied the photograph "I don't think so. Perhaps I know it too well," Rebecca slowly answered.

Nigel did not press her. "That's a noble bed. Though I don't know how people didn't get claustrophobia when they drew the bed curtains."

She gave him a fleeting, timid glance, then unexpectedly giggled.

"Papa said I was made on that bed, so I might as well lie on it "

"What music do you like best?" Nigel asked, pointing to the phonograph and the disc holders beside it.

"Mozart He makes me feel young and—and bubbly. Don't you think he's marvelous?"

"I do. And does Walter like him?"

"I'm getting him to. In fact, we were playing the clarinet quintet and some piano concertos that night when—" Rebecca broke off abruptly. "Did you hear it?"

"The clarinet quintet?"

"I thought I heard the telephone." She ran out to the head of the stairs and listened. "Perhaps someone has answered it Well, we'd better be getting on."

"I hope I'm not taking up too much of your time."

"Oh, it's all right. Graham said he'd cook the dinner today. He's quite good at it He cooked at the Seamen's Hospital here for a bit, a year or two ago. Do you want to see his room?"

"Yes, please It was your mother's, I think you told me."

"Yes. None of us felt much like using it after she died, and Papa had built a suite over the annex, so he put Graham into the room."

They were walking down another flight of stairs. At the bottom of it, next to the drawing room, a door was ajar. Rebecca led the way in, after knocking. The room was empty—in more senses than one, Nigel felt. Its occupant was not there, cooking, presumably. But, although it was well furnished, Graham's room gave a curious impression of anonymity, or of transient occupancy, like a college room in the vacation at the end of an academic year No photographs, no books, no clothes thrown onto chairs, a pad of clean blotting paper on the desk.

"I say, it's all very vacant, isn't it?" remarked Nigel cheerfully.

"Graham keeps everything in his cupboards and drawers. Locked up."

"This is directly under your room, I take it How long has Graham lived here?"

"Let me see. Seven years, it'd be."

"It must have been strange for you at first—to have an adopted brother. But you all seem to get on pretty well now."

"Graham *was* rather difficult at first—to get to know, I mean. Of course, he was only thirteen, and he'd had rather a bad time, apparently"

"So you mothered him?" said Nigel, smiling at her.

"Well, I tried" A frown came and went on Rebecca's face. "Actually, we sort of split up quite soon. James and I taking after Mother, I suppose it was inevitable we should feel closest to each other Harold is built more on Father's lines. Of course, he was nine years older than Graham, but Gra-

ham used to tail round after him a lot in the holidays. I'm afraid I'm putting it all rather badly."

She has become *so* voluble, thought Nigel, because she wants to postpone going into her father's room.

"Would you rather I finished the tour by myself?" he asked.

She looked momentarily puzzled, then her chin went up. "No. It's all right, thank you."

They went down eight stairs to a half landing, and turned right and then left along a short passage, at the end of which Rebecca opened a door. Dr. Piers' bedroom had a large window in its left-hand wall, looking out onto the lime tree and the gardens of houses farther up the hill. It was luxuriously furnished, a big built-in wardrobe contained at least two dozen suits, all on hangers, and many pairs of shoes with shoe trees in them. Nigel noticed three Picasso drawings on the wall opposite the bed. On the bedside table stood a telephone, a charming converted oil lamp, and a copy of "Albertine Disparue"; the lower shelf of this table held a portable radio.

"And this is the bathroom?"

"Yes," said Rebecca, who was still standing in the bedroom door. "Do go in if you want."

The bathroom was equally luxurious in its way, but had nothing to say to Nigel. After glancing round it, he walked out again, and pointed to the bedroom window. "Was that shut when you and Graham came in, the morning of your father's disappearance?"

"Yes. It had been a foggy night."

"And the bedroom door was shut?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to try an experiment What time did you start playing records that night?"

A flash of apprehension came and went in her eyes. "It must have been about nine o'clock."

"And for how long?"

"Well, off and on, till eleven."

"Will you go up to your room now and put on an L P record in three minutes' time Play it for a couple of minutes at the volume you were playing that night, then take it off When you've taken it off, sit still and listen I shall come up and ask you if you heard anything from below Oh, and shut your window; I presume it was shut against the fog that night?"

"Yes. All right. But I don't understand—"

As soon as she was gone, Nigel switched on at medium volume Dr. Piers'

bedside radio. A rather sepulchral voice came out of it: "—text is, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' "

A sermon. Couldn't be better. Nigel ran upstairs into Graham Loudron's room. With the window shut he could still just hear the radio preacher's voice. Presently he caught the Mozart D-minor piano concerto from Rebecca's room above; it was faint, and he could hear in occasional intervals the preacher's voice. After a few minutes the gramophone stopped. Nigel waited for another couple of minutes, then he started to walk about, talking to himself, opening the window, moving a chair. Finally he went down and switched off the radio, and then walked up to Rebecca's room His questions evidently puzzled her. She said she had heard nothing for a couple of minutes after she had stopped the gramophone, but then she thought she had heard someone talking and moving about on the floor below, though she wasn't sure.

"Won't you tell me what it's all about?"

"I hardly know myself," replied Nigel. "I've discovered that from Graham's room you can hear someone talking in your father's, but from your room you can't. Also that from your room you can hear movements in Graham's."

"Well, I could have told you that."

"*Did* you hear any, that night?"

Rebecca hesitated, flushing deeply. "I don't remember. I couldn't have, surely, with the gramophone on?"

Nigel did not pursue it. But he felt sure that Rebecca was not speaking the truth.

5. *7 + 13 = 20*

Nigel glanced at the sheet of paper on the arm of his chair. It was his practice during an investigation to jot down anything done or said by those concerned that had struck him as out of character, self-betraying, contradictory, cryptic, or in some other way significant, not because, with his phenomenal memory, he would forget them, but because, committed to paper, these random and heterogeneous items sometimes formed chemical associations, as it were, and created the beginnings of a pattern.

Piers Loudron: "My dear boy, at my age, and when one's tenure of life is unlikely to be long protracted, one feels the need not exactly for confession but for the drawing up of a balance sheet . . . My diary is giving me quite a new interest in life. It may even prolong it!"

James Loudron: A very heavy eater—insecurity, or energy? "If I'd wanted to destroy evidence, I could have done it any time in the last ten days."

Harold Loudron: In reply to Walter's suggestion that Piers might have gone along after dinner to see Harold and Sharon—"She wasn't—what the hell d'you mean, to see *us!*" . . . Wasn't *at home?*

Rebecca Loudron: Her account of going with Graham to look for their father—why does this stick in my mind?

Also, "we were playing the clarinet quintet and some piano concertos that night when—"

Graham Loudron: According to Rebecca, described the atmosphere at dinner the night his father disappeared as "Papa was waiting for something to happen."

And what was he doing across the river so early on Saturday morning?

Walter Barn: Not just the clown—one look enough for me.

Nigel read through the above. Then, after a pause, he took out his pen and wrote beneath them:

7 + 13 = 20: 1960 − 20 = 1940: cf. Em's statement that during the 1940 blitzes P L. acted "like he didn't care whether he lived or died."

A car stopped outside. Going to the window, Nigel saw it was a police car, and observed his old friend Chief Inspector Wright, of the Yard's C. Division, get out. Wright looked more than ever like a film director—lantern-jawed face, horn-rimmed spectacles, alert, darting eyes. Nigel brought him into the studio, where Clare kissed him warmly. In her presence, Wright loved to give an exaggerated performance of the bumbling middlebrow, the man who knows what he likes. He bent a cautious look upon the Female Nude.

"Well, you've got something there," he opined. "Massive and concrete"

"You should hear what my char says about it"

"Don't tell me! I know." Wright went outside, re-entered the studio with a heavy, bunioned gait, apprehensively circled the Female Nude "Gruesome, ain't it? Gives yer the creeps. Do I 'ave to dust *that?*"

Clare's laughter pealed out. "I'll get some drinks."

"So they've sent for the Murder Squad," said Nigel.

"Your D D.I 's a first-rate man, but he's got too much on his plate just now A wave of theft at the docks And there's a mob of teds terrorizing the respectable residents of Shooters Hill—but can Henderson get any witnesses to come forward? 'You were at home, sir, yesterday evening when a gang of youths broke every window in the multiple stores opposite your house?' 'Yes, but I didn't see or hear nothing, didn't pay no attention.' Here lies the dear old British Public, and the epitaph on its tombstone is, 'I don't want to have nothing to do with that.' And then they've had a buzz that there's a drug-distributing racket shifted its base to just across the river; our Narcotics boys are working on that with Henderson. Thank you, Miss Massinger, just a touch of cyanide and plenty of soda."

The sound of the St. Alfege bells ringing for Sunday evensong could be distinctly heard.

"To heaven or to hell," said Wright. "I've just had a long talk with Henderson, and he's given me acres of homework tonight. So you've got your foot in the door again, Strangeways?"

"Yes Are you and the D D I. convinced it's murder?"

"Hey, what's this? The family bribing you to prove it's suicide or something?" The Chief Inspector's tone was gently mocking, but his eyes on Nigel were sharp as dressed flints.

"Well, did you ever hear of someone being murdered by severing his wrist arteries? The jugular, yes. But—"

"There's got to be a first time for everything."

"And, even if the old man died quickly of shock, there'd be a hell of a lot

of blood. But there are no traces of it anywhere in the house or annex or garden."

"Which makes the suicide theory even more impossible than the murder one."

"I know. So far as his own house is concerned. It looks as if it must have happened somewhere else."

"Why?" said Clare dreamily.

"Why? But don't you see—"

"The Romans used to do it in their bath. Cut their arteries. Suppose Dr. Piers did just that. And bled to death. And someone ran the water out of the bath. There'd be no trace —not if you wiped the bath round afterward."

Wright was gazing at her keenly, his eyes sparking.

"But if that's how it happened, Clare, why should the person who found him dead go to the trouble and danger of putting him in the river?"

"And if he was *murdered* in his bath," said Nigel, "he would have been killed in that way to make it look like suicide. So, again, why throw the body in the river?"

"And why remove one of his cutthroat razors?" asked Wright. "Why not leave the weapon beside him in the bath?"

"The sleeping draught could work either way, I suppose. The murderer gives it to him at dinner to make him go upstairs early—to his bedroom adjoining a bathroom—and soften him up. Or Dr. Piers might have taken it himself, after dinner, to dull the suicide process."

Curled up on the sofa, Clare shivered delicately, like a cat. "I think it's all perfectly horrible. I doubt if one could wholly approve of Dr. Piers, but at least he was *someone*—he stood out." She sighed, then added, "Don't suicides generally leave notes?"

"The missing diary pages might have constituted a suicide note Has the D.D I. had any luck with them?"

"There are two sets of fingerprints," Wright answered. "Both on the left-hand page facing the first missing page. One lot are Dr Piers', the other will probably be Dr. James Loudron's—we're taking his tomorrow, and everyone else's in the family and household. The pages were ripped out, not cut out." He pantomimed, bending wide open an imaginary exercise book with the fingers of his left hand while tearing out pages with the other "You see, it should leave a very strong thumbprint on the left-hand page. But there isn't one; only faint marks What does that suggest?" The C I D man had developed a habit of shooting such questions at his subordinates; it was part of their education, and kept them up to the mark

"Gloves, of course," Nigel replied. "And you would hardly wear gloves to tear pages out of a book unless those pages incriminated you."

"Incriminated you for what?"

Nigel smiled. "You're trying to edge me over to the murder theory. But Jack the Book Ripper could have had other reasons."

"Such as what?"

"For example, he might prefer that his fingerprints should not be found on the book, supposing that he planned to use those missing pages as a lever against someone else."

"Oh, lord! Don't start bringing blackmail in now. Isn't one crime enough for you?" Wright jumped impatiently to his feet, strode over to a shelf that held a herd of the little archaic clay horses, with spoutlike muzzles, that were Clare's form of doodling. "We're doing what I'm always on at my chaps not to do—theorizing without enough facts." He took up one of the horses, gave it an imaginary lump of sugar, and put it down again. "Murder cases are solved by dozens of men in macintoshes going into thousands of houses and asking tens of thousands of people a few simple questions. Not," he continued, moving over to Nigel's chair and stubbing his finger on the sheet of paper, "by doing abstract equations. '7 + 13 = 20: 1960 − 20 = 1940'—what the devil's this in aid of?"

"Not so abstract, my dear fellow. It struck me as odd that *if* those missing pages are in fact Dr. Piers' diary, he should have used his 1940 casebook for it instead of his 1960 one, which has plenty of blank pages. Did the year 1940 have some special meaning for him? Well, he was a hero in the blitzes, by all accounts—and a desperate hero."

"I daresay. But what's this '7 + 13 = 20'?"

"Rebecca Loudron told me that Graham Loudron was adopted by Dr Piers, at the age of thirteen, seven years ago. So he was born in 1940."

"So?"

"So I don't know what. Perhaps I'm becoming a number fetishist."

"I'd stick to shoes, if I were you."

"Has it occurred to anyone," asked Clare, after a pause, "that Graham's adoption was a bit peculiar?"

"In what way?" said Wright.

"Well, we are told his father was Dr. Piers' best friend and killed in the war. Why did Dr Piers wait till 1953 to adopt him? Because Graham's mother was alive till then? Possibly, but we don't *know* when she died. And wasn't it rather excessive to *adopt* him? I mean, for a rather selfish *and* patriarchal man like the doctor? I'm surprised he didn't just take Graham

into his house, educate him and so on, without making him one of the family and giving him his name."

"I'm not," said Nigel.

Clare opened her dark eyes wide at him.

"You see, I strongly suspect Graham is Dr. Piers' real son. Rebecca has a photograph of her father on honeymoon with his wife in the early twenties And there's a distinct resemblance between the young Piers and Graham."

"Do you suppose his—any of the family know this?"

Nigel shrugged. "No idea. But they'd better not know that *we* suspect it. If it's true, it would account for Piers' rather strange action in adopting a boy soon after his wife died He couldn't while she was alive, either because it would be bad taste or because she knew about his peccadillo Or, of course, both."

"Well," said Chief Inspector Wright, "that's an interesting little bit of home chat. I don't see what bearing it could have on the case, but you follow it up if you like. Just your line. The mad archaeologist. Loves digging up the past. I must go and do some work Thank you kindly for the drink, ma'am."

"Just a moment I suggest you get the Fraud Squad to look discreetly into Harold Loudron's affairs. I—"

"It's being done. Henderson's idea. Any further instructions?" Wright grinned cockily at Nigel.

"Yes, you hard-faced servant of Loranorder Tell your Narcotics chums that Mrs. Harold Loudron is, or recently has been, a drug addict. Also—no, perhaps not."

"Yes? Don't clam up on me. All contributions gratefully received."

"Well, I *fancy* that there's some kind of complicity between Mrs Harold and Graham. I noticed it after dinner there one night—the first time we met the family. It may be just that they're bedmates, but it didn't feel like that."

"Very instructive, I'm sure."

"In his short career, Graham has been for brief periods a pianist in a jazz band and a cook at the Seamen's Hospital here "

"Ah *Now* you're talking. Lascars smuggling in hemp, eh? And night-club hot-number types tend to coke themselves up. Any dirt on other characters involved?"

"I'm not prepared to release it at present."

"Hoity-toity."

"I like to pan my dirt, in case there's some gold in it And that's the first time I've heard anyone say 'hoity-toity' since a scholarly great aunt of mine

rebuked me, at the age of fourteen, for putting her right on a quotation she'd made from a chorus in the 'Trachiniae' "

"I can just hear you doing it . . ."

For some time, after Wright had left, and they had finished their bacon-and-egg supper, Nigel and Clare talked over the mystery of Dr. Piers Loudron. Clare's fingers worked on a lump of clay they were shaping, of their own volition, into a spout-muzzled horse, while she gave all her attention to the problem Nigel worried at.

"Let's forget for the moment," he was saying, "the question of murder v. suicide Take the hypothesis that it was in his own house he killed himself or was killed. How could the body have been conveyed to the river? He was frail and weighed little, but one can't imagine X carrying him there in a sack or trundling him in a wheelbarrow; too dangerous, even allowing for the fog; too bizarre altogether."

"So he must have been conveyed in a car."

"Exactly. But Henderson's chaps have been over Dr. Piers' Daimler and Dr. James' Morris with all the resources of science, and they found no trace of the body's having been carried, either inside the cars or in their luggage boots."

"Yes, but what trace would they be able to find? X could have bandaged the wrists, so there'd be no bloodstains left, and anyway he'd have stopped bleeding by then."

"Hair," said Nige. "You couldn't bundle a body into a boot or a back seat without rubbing off a hair or two."

"Not if you'd wrapped that tweed overcoat of his round the head?"

"Ye-es. That might work."

Clare's eyes lit up. "No, I've got it! Something much simpler If X used Dr. Piers' Daimler and set the body beside him on the front seat, it wouldn't matter if the police found hairs there—or any other traces of him except blood. You'd *expect* to find them in a car he was constantly using."

"Good. You may have hit it. The only alternative I could think of is that X borrowed for the job one of the cars that are parked every night on Burney Street. But, unless he's a professional car thief, he wouldn't have been able to break into one of them without causing damage, which the owner would have reported to the police Well, then, let's imagine X going off with the body in the front seat of the Daimler Where would he take it?"

"In that fog, he'd not drive far, surely The nearest point on the river is by the pier."

"But you can't drive right up to the river wall there. You'd have to hump the body nearly a hundred yards, past the 'Cutty Sark' "

"Well, then, the next nearest point is Park Row, the road that runs past the east end of the Naval College. X could stop the car on the opposite side from the Trafalgar Tavern, and he'd only have to take about ten paces to the waterside."

"Yes There's a street lamp there. But in that fog it'd be fairly safe, unless someone walked out of the Trafalgar Tavern just as X was dumping the body in the river," said Nigel slowly "It might be safer still to drive down one of the streets that lead to the river farther east. The wharves would be absolutely deserted, I should think, at that time. There's Lassell Street, to the west of Harold Loudron's house, and Pelton Road, which runs down just east of it to Lovell's Wharf. All this presumes special knowledge on X's part."

"Of Greenwich?"

"Yes, and of the tide table. It'd have been unwise to throw the body off the river wall at any time except high water or the top of the ebb, if you wanted it to be pulled out from the shore"

"But if X merely wanted to get rid of the body? So that it wasn't found in the house?"

"Then he'd surely not have needed to take it as far as the river There's all that waste ground along Burney Street, for instance. No, the fact that the body was thrown in the river suggests that X wanted its discovery to be put off as long as possible."

"So that it might be difficult to prove *how* Dr Piers died?"

"Exactly. And if the ship's screw had cut off his arms instead of his legs, we should *never* have known how he died."

Clare Massinger stretched out her legs on the sofa and gazed at the lofty ceiling. "If it was murder, all I can say is that X was very lucky."

"Lucky?"

"To get a combination of thick fog and high tide at the right time, *and* the several members of the family dispersed in different rooms."

"Lucky or patient. He may have waited a long time for that combination of circumstances, including Mrs Hyams' confinement, which kept Dr. James out of the house for several hours that night."

"I suppose you're safe to assume he died that night, or in the small hours of the morning?"

"Pretty safe, if it was in his own house he died. But there's no absolute certainty that he did He *may* have had what Harold calls a 'brain storm,' and wandered out after the effects of the sedative had worn off, and some-

how remained in concealment for a period until— But it's so unlikely one can dismiss it. No, the other possibility I have to consider is that he left the house that night, perfectly in his right mind—"

"But having changed his suit, shirt, and underclothes," Clare interrupted. "Why?"

"Yes, I know that sounds wildly improbable, but pass it over. It couldn't have been an emergency call, for his doctor's bag was not taken. The only thing I can imagine taking him out of the house on a foggy night like that would be an appeal from one of his family. Harold Loudron did ring him up before dinner; Dr. Piers was heard to say it could wait till tomorrow. Well, he might have changed his mind—"

"After sleeping on it for an hour or two with the aid of a barbiturate?" asked Clare skeptically.

"—might have changed his mind and gone along to Harold's house"

"But surely at his age he wouldn't? He'd have rung Harold and discussed whatever it was on the telephone, or asked him to come over to Croom's Hill."

"Dr. Piers was not too old, I suspect, to act on an impulse—irrationally, even. Well, he walks along to Harold's house—"

"Remembering to take a cutthroat razor with him."

"Oh, blast you, Clare! Let me finish building my house of cards before you blow it down There's no evidence that the missing razor had not been removed from its case days or weeks before"

"All right. So the old man gets to Harold's house, and then what?"

"If it turns out that Harold's business affairs are rocky, and *if* his father refuses him the money needed to straighten them out, Harold has a strong motive for killing him. And, what's more, he has an extremely convenient window, right above the water, from which to jettison the body."

"There's a king-size snag in that," said Clare.

"Oh, there is, is there?"

"Don't be grumpy Suppose Harold is in such a desperate hurry for money; surely he'd not dispose of his father's body in such a way that it might not be found for weeks? He'd want to borrow on the strength of his expectations from the old man's will *immediately.* And anyway, what's the fair Sharon doing while Harold is cutting his father's arteries? Encouraging him with high-pitched cries?"

"You're impossible tonight, love. Actually, I suspect she was out on the tiles that night. Harold said something when I was talking to the family this morning which—and he got very hot under the collar when Walter Barn suggested that Dr Piers might have gone to see him and Sharon that night.

Still, I daresay it's all got some fairly innocent explanation. Perhaps we'd better stick to the Daimler . . ."

When Chief Inspector Wright turned up after breakfast the next morning, Nigel at once said to him, "Before you start interrogating the suspects, I think it might be worth while getting one of your chaps to make inquiries in the Trafalgar Tavern and in the houses at the north end of Pelton Street and possibly Lassell Street."

"And what is he to inquire about?" asked Wright, with an exaggeratedly blank expression.

"Whether anyone saw Dr. Piers' Daimler standing at the river end of the street on the night he disappeared."

Wright's poker face registered a faint stir of emotion.

"Interesting you should say that. I had a man interviewing the residents of the Trafalgar Tavern last night. One of them—he's been away for the last week and only just returned—remembers seeing a Daimler, which he recognized as the doctor's, at about 11.15 that night. This gentleman had popped out to give his dog a bit of relief before going to bed The car was standing, empty, on the opposite side of the street, about ten yards from the waterfront. Our witness strolled across the road and all but bumped into the car, the fog was so thick. And now," added Wright, "would you mind telling me just how you lighted upon this information?"

"By theorizing on insufficient facts," Nigel replied.

6. *CHAIN REACTIONS*

As the police car drew up outside the Loudrons' house, the front door opened and a body flew out into the paved forecourt, followed by a camera that smashed itself against the iron railings Wright and Nigel hurried through the wrought iron gate. A dazed little man, with blood pouring from his nose and a vicious, frightened look in his eye, picked himself up.

"He's gone mad," the man panted "I'll have the law on him! He can't treat the press like this."

Wright and his sergeant began dusting the man off. Nigel rang the front doorbell, then, hearing sounds of violence from within, moved to the window of the study. Looking in, he saw Walter Barn in the process of beating up a fattish man a good head taller than himself. Rebecca Loudron, her back to a bookcase on the far side of the room, was watching the massacre with an expression in which horror and a fascinated excitement unpleasingly blended If Walt had ever heard of the Queensbury Rules, he had forgotten what he had heard. Slipping a wild right swing, he drove his fist into his opponent's belly, well below the belt, then, while the large man caved forward, making a hideous sound as if his guts were falling out of his mouth, Walt clubbed him across the cheek with his right, and followed it up with a brutal kick at the kneecap The man sprawled backward across the desk. Hammering at the window, Nigel at last attracted Rebecca's attention She ran out of the room to open the front door Nigel rushed in, followed by Wright, the sergeant, and the press photographer

The large man was rolling on the floor now, whimpering and retching, forearms cradling his head, at which Walt was kicking. In a moment the frail-looking Wright had Walter Barn's powerful arm in a lock that made the young painter bend forward, gasping with pain. He pushed him down into a chair, sent Rebecca scurrying for iodine and dressings, helped his sergeant to lift Walter's victim onto the sofa, turned back to his assailant

"I am a police officer What's been going on here?"

Walter Barn's demoniac fit had passed away as suddenly as a summer hailstorm He lay back in the chair, his speedwell-blue eyes dancing

"These two bastards were making a nuisance of themselves They insulted Becky."

"That's a damned lie," exclaimed the little photographer in an aggrieved,

adenoidal whine. "We were only doing our duty. We asked for an interview with Miss Loudron, an exclusive, and this maniac here—"

"Asked for an interview! You lousy little gutter-press lap dog! What you mean is, you and that fat slob on the sofa there got your foot in the door, pushed your way in past my fiancée, started photographing this study, badgered my fiancée for what you call a 'story—' "

"You've no call to use violence. D'you realize you've broken a valuable camera?"

"I'm delighted to hear it. Your sort make me sick. You think that, because you're in the pay of some revolting press lord, you've a right to force your way into anyone's house and exploit people's grief to cook up a tasty story for your sickening readers—"

"The public," mouthed the large man, who had painfully gathered himself into a sitting position on the sofa, "has a right to be informed on all matters of general interest. You're going to be sorry for this, young man, whoever you are. We shall deal with you."

"God damn you and your public! Hasn't the private individual any rights?" Walter Barn, quivering now like a taut wire, spoke with such violence that the fat man shrank back and Wright interposed.

"All right. Break it up."

"What makes me vomit is the bloody, sanctimonious hypocrisy of muckrakers like that hero trembling on the sofa there, telling us about their sacred duty to provide dollops of sewage for the moronic millions, and—"

"I said break it up." Wright's voice was cold as a chisel. Rebecca came in with a first-aid box. "Will you attend to him?" said Wright.

"I wouldn't touch him with a barge pole," answered Rebecca, her nostrils wide with distaste.

"And you a doctor's daughter!" mocked Walter.

"Sergeant, attend to this man. You're a great nuisance, all of you," Wright equably continued. "Wasting my time with your squabbles like this."

"Are you in charge of the case now?" the large man asked him, while the sergeant applied iodine and a lint dressing to his split cheek. "Anything fresh broken? Can you give me a story?"

"Smut hound still on the trail," Walter remarked.

"Keep your wit to yourself," said Wright. "I'll take statements from you two representatives of the press, then you will leave. I'm busy today."

Ten minutes later, Nigel, Wright, and the sergeant were alone in the study with Walter Barn.

"God-damned liars," said the young painter. "They, *did* push their way in and they *did* molest Becky."

"How do you know? According to your statement, you did not arrive till later."

"Becky told me when I came in. And lucky I did. She was terribly upset."

"How did you get in?"

"Through the door."

"Now look, Mr. Barn. I've no time to waste on childish repartee. You know perfectly well what I mean."

"Oh, all right. I let myself in. I have a key."

"How long have you had it?"

"Becky gave me one—oh, a month or two ago."

"Right. Now we're going back to the night Dr. Piers Loudron disappeared. I understand you visited this house before dinner?"

"What the nobs call 'dinner,' yes About 6:30. I chatted with Becky in the kitchen for half an hour or so; then I walked back to my humble abode."

"Had you any special reason for visiting Miss Loudron that night?"

"Just lerv, Inspector. Can't seem to keep away from the girl"

"You walked a mile, in a thick fog, and a mile back, simply to have a chat?"

"Beneath a rugged exterior, I'm ever so romantic."

Chief Inspector Wright, appearing satisfied, dropped this subject. Nigel had offen witnessed his interrogations, but was still fascinated by Wright's technique—a technique of suspect-tapping, one might call it; as a man might move round a room, tapping the walls for the hollow sound that would betray a hiding place, so Wright probed here and there at the surface of the person he was interrogating, his senses alert for a suspect's relaxing of tension when he moved away from a dangerous area, a tightening of tension when he returned to it. Had Mr. Barn ever been in the surgery? No. Did he remember any more of the telephone conversation between Dr. Piers and Harold Loudron than he had told the D.D.I? No Could he drive a car? Probably, but he'd only ridden motor bikes so far. Would he make any objection to having his fingerprints taken? None at all.

"Did you ever quarrel with the deceased?"

"No. He just froze me off—or tried to."

"Because you wished to marry his daughter?"

"Yes. He treated me like something the cat brought in."

"So Miss Loudron had to do the fighting?"

Pause. Walter Barn's eyes looked wary. "I don't get you."

"She had serious quarrels with her father, over you?"

"Well, I—yes, she did."

"And a particularly violent one the evening he disappeared—not long before you turned up?"

"Who the hell told you that?"

"Information received," Wright blandly answered Nigel sat up. This was news to him. Or was the Inspector flying a kite?

"If you knew it already, why ask me?" said Walter.

"We have to check and countercheck every bit of evidence. Is it true?"

"There was a quarrel that day I don't know how violent. I wasn't in attendance."

"But surely you do. That's why you walked over here in the fog. Miss Loudron had telephoned you She needed your help, your comfort, urgently?"

The painter made no reply, and Wright did not press him. Instead, he put a few dummy questions about Dr. Piers—had Mr. Barn felt him to have been apprehensive, or unusually depressed, recently? No. he wouldn't know anyway.

With the perfunctory air of one asking a merely routine question, Wright said, "So you left the house that night about seven, and walked straight home? You didn't go out again?"

Nigel, for whom Walter Barn's small round head perched on his square shoulders had always seemed like a stone ball on a manorial gate pillar, now suddenly saw it as a ball not cemented there but precariously balanced, as if a puff of wind might roll it off.

"No, I didn't go out again." There was a queer intonation, a sort of smirk, in Walter's voice.

"You were here all the time?" put in Nigel, so unobtrusively that it was barely audible.

"That's what I'm—" Walter stopped, and almost instantly went on, "what I'm telling you; I went back to my studio and had supper and looked through a Piero della Francesca book Becky had lent me, and then I went to bed."

"You live alone?" asked Wright, his eyes boring into Walter.

"Yes."

"So we have to take your word for it that you went home and stayed there all night?"

"I suppose you do But why shouldn't you? You don't think I croaked the old man, do you?"

"Well, that'll be all for the present. We'll just take your fingerprints"

When this had been done and the sergeant sent to fetch Rebecca Loudron, Nigel said to Wright, "This alleged quarrel between Dr. Piers and his daughter—were you inventing it?"

"Inventing? Certainly not," Wright replied rather curtly. "Graham Loudron gave it in evidence to the D.D.I."

"He did, did he? And did Miss Loudron admit it?"

"She agreed there'd been a row, yes. Played it down a bit, though."

"And Walter Barn may *not* have left this house that night?"

"Yes. You caught him out very neatly there."

Nigel gazed noncommittally at the Inspector. "Do you see her as a Lady Macbeth? A parricidal Lady Macbeth?"

Before Wright could answer, Rebecca Loudron came in. The sergeant returned to his hard chair and unobtrusively took out his shorthand notebook. Rebecca had this new look of maturity still, but there was a glaze of uneasiness over it, which did not escape Wright's notice.

"I'm sorry to be badgering you, Miss Loudron—particularly after the distressing ordeal you had this morning."

"Will they make trouble for Walt? They were horrible. Can they have him arrested for—whatever it's called—assault and battery?"

Wright smiled at her. "Technically, they could sue him, yes. But I doubt if they will. Depends whether their paper decides it'd be good publicity. It'd mean washing some dirty linen in court. And, of course, I shall have to make a report to your local police about it. Incidentally, was there no one in the house who could have helped you to deal with them?"

"Well, James was having a surgery. And Graham—I don't know where he was; I called out to him, but he didn't come."

The Inspector gently sounded Rebecca about the quarrel with her father, but he did not seem to get any further than the D.D.I. had done, judging by his reception of her answers, in which there showed clearly a conflict between loyalty to the dead and resentment at her father's attitude toward Walter and herself. Nigel studied the woman's face and manner: the strong nose, the fine, slightly protuberant brown eyes, the heavy eyebrows, the odd mixture of gaucheness and dignity. Suddenly her woman's nature broke through the web of Wright's interrogation

"Why are you asking me all these questions? Everyone knows Papa and I quarreled a lot about Walt " Her lips quivered, then set firmly. "Do you really think I could—could *kill* Papa because he wouldn't let me marry Walt?"

Wright looked at her with surprise and respect. He said lightly, at his most charming, "I expect you often *felt* like doing it."

Rebecca returned his gaze, shocked for a moment by Wright's unofficial comment, then timidly smiling. "Well, of course he did make me very angry sometimes. But—"

"And you have no alibi," continued Wright, smiling still as if he were a friend, a brother, gently teasing her. "Sitting up there all alone playing gramophone records."

Rebecca glanced at him suspiciously. Her instinct told her this was not just a bit of rather tasteless badinage. She remained silent, watchful.

"Or were you? What would you say if I told you that we have evidence you were not alone that night?" It was a common gambit in police interrogation, but it still made Nigel uncomfortable He quickly said, "You told me that yourself. Yesterday morning. You said, '*We* were playing the clarinet quintet and some piano concertos that night when—' and then you broke off and pretended to have heard the telephone."

"It was a slip of the tongue," she got out hurriedly.

"Oh, come, Miss Loudron. That really won't do, will it?" said Wright. "Anyway, why should you be afraid to say Mr. Barn was with you that night? It gives you both an alibi, doesn't it? At any rate, up to the time he left you? What time did he leave?"

Rebecca Loudron simply did not have the resources to cope with this sort of thing. The flustered, mutinous look that Nigel had seen on her face when her father had been exercising his sarcasm showed again now.

"About midnight," she muttered. "But there was nothing—we did nothing wrong," she defiantly added.

She's talking about sex, not about murder, thought Nigel; either she's innocent or a very remarkable actress, like Lady Macbeth. Wright continued to probe. Walter Barn, whom Rebecca had telephoned in great distress after the last scene with her father, had talked with her in the kitchen till dinner, then gone up to her room, where she rejoined him at about quarter to nine after her father went to bed. She and Walter had been together there all the time till he left, neither had gone out of the room, even for a minute; she had smuggled him up some supper, and they talked and played records.

"It all sounds extremely innocent," Wright remarked. "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

Rebecca looked indecisive, as if trying to work out not an answer but the implications of the answer. Finally, she threw up her head, giving it to them fair and square. "Walt asked me not to."

"Isn't that rather odd, since it gives you both an alibi? For some of that night, anyway, and assuming you are telling the truth "

"Oh, I'm telling the truth." Rebecca threw it off almost negligently, as if it hardly needed saying. "You see, Walt isn't—he's working class, and they don't like being mixed up in anything to do with—well, the police."

"'I don't want to have nothing to do with that,'" Nigel murmured, quoting the Inspector's own words of Sunday evening.

"Let's leave that. Now, Miss Loudron"—Wright spoke slowly and with the utmost seriousness—"when you were up in your room with Mr. Barn, did you hear anything? Anything out of the usual? Anything that puzzles you now?"

There was a protracted pause. Rebecca seemed to be struggling with something in her mind. At last she said uncertainly, in a low tone, "Well, we did think we heard voices, from Graham's room."

"Whose voices?"

"Graham's. And—well, it sounded like Sharon's, the other one; but it couldn't have been, because she was at home."

"A woman's voice, at any rate? Angry? Frightened? How did it sound?"

Rebecca's face flushed darkly. She jerked out, "It was—sort of laughing. And then—then it cried out." She lowered her eyes. "We—Walt thought they were love-making."

"What time was this?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps an hour after I'd gone up."

Wright could get nothing more precise than this out of her. "And that was all? You didn't hear anyone leave the house later?"

"No. You see, the gramophone was on most of the time."

"Or—your room's at the back, isn't it—a car leaving your garage?"

"No. But nobody'd have taken out a car in a fog like that, surely?"

After a few more questions, Wright took Rebecca's fingerprints and let her go. The sergeant was sent to fetch Graham Loudron. One of Inspector Wright's great gifts as a detective officer was his capacity for intuitively adapting himself to the personality of each different witness. With the bouncy, like Walter Barn, he could enter into the game, become jolly and unofficial, but also, if need arose, bounce them so hard that they were deflated Rebecca he had handled not just with sympathy but with a kind of gentle firmness and decisiveness that would feel like moral support to one lacking in self-confidence and mental clarity. When he interviewed Graham Loudron, Nigel saw Wright's method with a natural arguer of the toss.

As soon as Graham saw Nigel in the study, he asked Wright, "Is Mr. Strangeways here officially?"

"Do you object to his presence?" said Wright, no less coolly.

"No, I'm just surprised."

"Inspector Wright has allowed me to co-operate," Nigel put in. "I'm here to see that none of you makes a fool of himself."

While Wright questioned Graham Loudron about his movements on the night of Dr Piers' disappearance, Nigel studied the young man's personality. It was difficult to believe he was only twenty; the triangular face, the small, protrusive mouth, the eyes that fastened like limpets on whomsoever he was talking to, together with Graham's self-contained manner, deferential yet obscurely derisive—all gave the impression of an experience beyond his years; experience, but not maturity.

"You told Inspector Henderson that the deceased was 'waiting for something to happen' that night at dinner. Can you enlarge upon it?"

"I don't think so. It was a feeling I had."

"You had it at the time? You're sure it didn't come to you later, as a result of what happened?"

"Perfectly sure."

"You felt he was nervous? Apprehensive?"

"No, not exactly. His mind seemed to be elsewhere. And it was as if he was keying himself up."

"To commit suicide?"

Graham shrugged. "How can I tell? I'm not a mind reader. I thought you'd rejected the idea of suicide, anyway." There was a hint of a question in his last remark, but Wright ignored it.

"You didn't see your father take a sleeping draught, at dinner or just before?"

"No."

According to Graham, he, James Loudron, and their father had had a glass of sherry together just before dinner; Dr. Piers drank nothing with the meal, but had coffee after it in the dining room; Rebecca had made the coffee and poured it out.

"As he felt sleepy soon after dinner, it looks as if he must have taken the sleeping draught either in his sherry or privately before that."

Graham Loudron agreed.

"And after dinner you went up to your room and stayed there till you went to bed?"

"Yes."

"Alone all the time?"

"I've already told Inspector Henderson all this."

"Yet your sister heard voices from your room—at about ten o'clock."

Graham's eyes, expressionless as shellfish, gave nothing away. "She's mistaken."

"A woman's voice. You say you did not have a woman in your room?"

"What woman am I supposed to have had?"

"Please answer the question, Mr. Loudron."

"If I had had a woman there, I should certainly not tell you who it was," replied Graham coolly.

"I'm not asking for her name. I'm asking, was there a woman in your room?"

"Is there any reason why I should tell you?"

"Yes. Two reasons. If you don't, you are obstructing the police in their duties, and you are depriving yourself of a possible alibi for part of the period, at least, during which your father died."

"Died? You evidently mean 'was murdered.' "

"Well?"

Graham's lips twisted sourly. "I don't want an alibi, and I don't care a damn about obstructing the police."

"Tell me, did you love your adopted father?"

Graham swallowed hard. "He was very good to me. But I wouldn't say he was a lovable man. If you mean, do I want to see his murder avenged, I'm sorry, but I can't think in melodramatic terms like that."

"Did you ever suspect he might be your real father?"

The young man crossed his knees and began smoothing his sleek hair. His voice remained quite smooth. "Well, of course I have wondered. I couldn't imagine why he should be so fond of me, do so much for me. But he never said anything about it."

"And your mother, when she was alive—did she not talk about your father?"

"Do you have to drag my mother into this?" For the first time, Graham showed emotion. Then, controlling himself, he said, "She didn't. All she told me was that he had died, in the war, soon after I was born."

Inspector Wright switched back to the night of Dr. Piers' death. No, Graham had heard no sounds from Dr. Piers' room. Yes, he thought he had heard a car that night, driving out of the garage yard, it was just after he had gone to bed—about eleven o'clock. Why had he not mentioned this before? Nobody had asked him. Whose car did he think it was? He hadn't given it a thought, but assumed now it must have been Dr. James going out to an emergency call.

"Why did you go over to the Isle of Dogs last Saturday morning so early?" asked Wright, switching the probe again.

"But I didn't."

"But I saw you coming out of the Greenwich tunnel, on this side, at half past seven," said Nigel.

"Ah. The household spy at work," remarked Graham. His naked antipathy for Nigel, which the latter had felt the first time they met, again made the air vibrate between them.

"So you admit you were lying?" asked Wright at his chilliest.

"I admit nothing of the sort You asked why I went over to the Isle of Dogs on Saturday morning. I didn't. I went there on Friday night and stayed overnight."

The Inspector was on his feet, quick as a spring released, and standing over Graham. "Don't you try this schoolboy logic-chopping on me, young man—I don't wear that sort of thing. Why did you go to the Isle of Dogs?"

"I went to visit an old tart in Poplar, and we got talking, and by then it was so late I stayed the night in her house," replied Graham, his composure quite unruffled.

"Her name and address, please."

"I fail to see what my nocturnal occupations have to do with the case you're—"

"Don't start arguing the toss with me. If you persist in being childish, I shall send men round every house in Poplar, with your photograph; they'll find out soon enough, and meanwhile I shall put you in the can for obstruction."

"And what does the family friend say about that?" Graham addressed Nigel with a sneer.

"Do what the Inspector asks you, and stop making a bloody fool of yourself," Nigel equably replied.

Graham Loudron gave the name and address. While his fingerprints were being taken, he remarked offhandedly, "You'll be wasting your time on old Nellie. I go and talk to her now and then about my mother She used to know her But if I'm allowed to make a suggestion—"

"Go ahead."

"Ask brother James about *his* mum. Ask him what she died of Our friend here, who's so keen on secret passages in private lives, might be interested." Graham paused, then said, with remarkable bitterness, "Funny, isn't it, the idea of a woman in a posh house like *this* dying of neglect?"

When Graham Loudron had gone, the Inspector flashed at Nigel one of his rare smiles, which were like the edge of a hatchet. "Beginning to open up, aren't they, my dear old household spy? Why has that young chap got it in for you?"

"Natural antipathy, I suppose."

"Bit of the old lag about him, I thought, I don't mean just that sea-lawyering. Wonder if he's been inside."

"Yes, I've felt that. An approved school could have done it; or an orphanage even, if it was a bad one."

The sergeant ushered in Dr James Loudron, who had agreed to give Wright an interview between his surgery hour and starting his rounds

"I hope we can get this over quickly," he said. "The work's getting on top of me with my father—"

"I'm sure we can, doctor," Wright cut in briskly. He asked James first about the sleeping draught, James had nothing to contribute here; he certainly hadn't seen the old man taking any that night, nor had he noticed anything out-of the-way in his father's behavior at dinner, except perhaps that he talked rather less than usual.

"And now, doctor, let me make sure that I'm clear about your own movements, just for the record. You went out shortly after dinner to see a patient?"

"Yes. Mrs Hyams. Her first confinement. I walked along to her house about 8 P.M."

"And returned here?"

"At 10:15."

"The baby having been born?"

"Just so."

"No complications?"

"I wasn't entirely happy about the patient. She was very weak, and I feared a postnatal hemorrhage. Our district nurse, who was midwifing, had to go straight off on another job, so I thought I'd look in on Mrs. Hyams again."

"You have a most excellent reputation for conscientiousness, doctor. I've discovered that already." Wright was at his most bland and disarming. "I must say, if I'd been you, I'd have thought twice about walking back again to a patient in a fog like you had here."

A shocked, slightly censorious look replaced the modestly gratified one with which James had received the Inspector's compliment. "It'd be highly unprofessional not to—"

"How long did it take you to walk back there?"

A dark flush, reminding Nigel of Rebecca Loudron, came over his face, and a bead or two of sweat started on his forehead

"Nearly ten minutes, I should think. But I didn't walk, you know. I took out a car that time."

"Your car?"

"My father's. Mine had developed a fault—the petrol feed. I put it right a day or two later."

"What made you use a car, if I may ask, when you'd walked the first time?"

"Well, I was extremely tired, and I thought the fog had lifted a bit. I was wrong," Dr. James added ruefully.

"You found your way, though, in the end?"

"Yes."

"To? Where does this Mrs. Hyams live?"

"In Crane Street."

Oh, lord! thought Nigel. That's torn it! Wright, ignorant as yet of the topography of Greenwich, could hardly be expected to know that Crane Street was a narrow passage, not negotiable by traffic, running past the back of the Trafalgar Tavern. "So you'd naturally park the car by the Trafalgar Tavern, near the opening into Crane Street?" he said.

"Yes That's where I left it," replied James Loudron, looking a bit puzzled. Nigel dared not meet Wright's eye. The doctor began to bluster a little: "I'm sure you know your job, Inspector. But I'm a busy man, and I can't for the life of me see the point of these questions." He hunched the heavy shoulders that had often bullocked their way through the loose in hospital cup ties.

"In my job," said Wright genially, "we have to ask millions of questions, only a few of which turn out to be the crucial ones Between your visits to Mrs. Hyams, what did you do, sir?"

He had gone up to his room, said James Loudron, wishing to read up a medical point, but Rebecca's gramophone in the adjoining room had disturbed his concentration, so he brought the book down to the study.

"And during this period—10:15 to about eleven—you heard nothing that now strikes you as suspicious or out of the ordinary?"

"No. But, mind you, I was concentrating pretty hard I wouldn't have noticed anything short of a telephone bell ringing."

"I appreciate that And now tell me, doctor," Wright went on, with no change of tone or emphasis, "what did your mother die of?"

"My mother die of?" James' expression of perplexity was quite ludicrous. "What on earth do you think you're getting at?"

"I know it must seem an irrelevance. But could you please tell me?"

After a long stare at the Inspector, Dr. James launched out on a medical statement, ending, "what is generally known as fatty degeneration of the heart."

"It would be incorrect to say that she died of neglect?"

"*Neglect?*" James exploded. "She had the best medical attention in—where the devil did you get such a preposterous idea?"

"Your brother Graham has hinted that she died of neglect."

"Graham? The bloody little twister! Neglect, indeed! It's absolutely insufferable." For a moment, in the midst of the storm, an extraordinary change came over James' angry face —a sort of breathless, anguished calm out of which, almost inaudibly, he muttered, "But how could *he* know?" Then he glared suspiciously at Wright, like a bull that has discovered that a nice warm extent of sand is in fact an arena dotted with infuriating colors and inimical objects, and put down his heavy head and charged. Graham was untrustworthy, sly, disloyal. He could not stick at anything; after being asked to leave the public school to which Dr. Piers had sent him, he had been found several jobs but given each of them up—or been sacked—after a short trial. The trouble was, Graham had been overindulged and totally spoiled by Dr. Piers.

James' jealousy of his brother's preferential treatment came out clearly enough, but Nigel felt there was something fictitious about his diatribe, as though he had whipped himself up into this rage against Graham in order to conceal from them, or from himself, a deeper-rooted grievance.

When James Loudron had been fingerprinted and released, Wright turned to Nigel.

"Talk about happy families!" he said, rolling up his eyes. "Well, free period now for Strangeways. I've fixed to see Mr. and Mrs. Harold Loudron at 6.30, when he's back from the City. Pick you up at 6.25."

"And what will you be doing till then?"

"Amongst other things, I must have a talk with that district nurse, and with Mrs. Hyams . . ."

That evening, as the police car moved down Croom's Hill and into the Woolwich Road, Inspector Wright told Nigel the result of these conversations Mrs Hyams had suffered no postnatal complications; she and her husband had not expected Dr. James to return so soon after the birth—he had certainly not told them he would do so—but they were not surprised when he did, for he was one who "took ever so much trouble." The district nurse was a little surprised. Though the birth had been far from easy, she had not thought Dr. James unduly anxious about the mother. On the other hand, he was a bit of a fuss pot, the nurse tactfully hinted without using the expression.

"Your comments?" asked Wright.

"If Dr. James killed his father, and it was part of a premeditated plan that he should take the Daimler and dump the body in the river, using a

visit to Mrs. Hyams as pretext, I should have thought he'd have told her and the nurse that he'd be returning shortly on a second visit, just to safeguard himself. If the murder was unplanned, the result of a sudden boiling up of passion, then the murder method is wildly paradoxical You don't neatly sever people's arteries in that state of mind; you bash them or strangle them."

The police car turned left off the Woolwich Road and hummed down toward the river. Harold Loudron took them into the room overlooking the Thames, where Sharon was already sitting. Nigel introduced Inspector Wright and the sergeant. After the usual preliminary politeness about being sorry to inconvenience them—just the routine of investigation—Wright said he wished to interview Mr. and Mrs. Loudron separately. Harold, frowning, started to protest about this, but Sharon said, "Don't be silly, Harold. The Inspector won't bite you." Her green eyes delayed upon Wright, who returned her his most antiseptic smile "Nigel can come and talk to me while you're being grilled."

"Sorry," said Nigel, "but I'm sitting in with Inspector Wright. Duty before pleasure."

The red-haired girl pouted at him, then teetered out with her model's walk. This time, Wright aimed straight for the gold.

"I understand, Mr Loudron, you had a telephone conversation with your father the night he died?"

"Yes. But it's quite—"

"Will you please tell me the substance of that conversation?"

"I entirely fail to see how this concerns your present business," Harold smoothly replied.

"I am trying to establish your father's state of mind. If he committed suicide—"

"But I thought there was no question about that"

"That he committed suicide?"

"I—er—no—the reverse."

"It has yet to be proved. Now, if your father had had bad news, something involving one of his family—he was very much the family man, I gather—if some disgrace threatened a member of his family, would you say he was the sort of man who might take his own life?"

"But this is quite fantastic. Purely—er—problematical."

"Your own business affairs, for example—"

"They are my own affair And I assure you they will bear the closest investigation."

"I'm glad to hear it, sir Because they are being investigated."

Harold started up from the kidney-shaped chair he was sitting on and flipped his cigarette into the fireplace. "This is the most unwarrantable interference with the liberties of the private citizen!"

"Oh, come, come now. In an investigation of this nature, the police are bound to inquire into background and motive. Do I take it that you refuse to tell us the substance of that telephone conversation?"

"Look here, Strangeways, is this man within his rights to put questions of this sort?"

"He is."

"Very well then. I've nothing to conceal. But, frankly, I was in a slight, temporary financial embarrassment; and I did ask my father for a loan."

"How slight?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How much did you ask for?"

Wright's abrupt question, so alien to the gilded circumlocutions of the City, clearly put Harold off his stroke. However, after a pause, he said, "Frankly, I needed a fair sum. For consolidation and—er—development, you know. I had in mind a figure of ten thousand pounds."

Wright's eyebrows went up "And did your father agree to back you to that extent?"

"I've no doubt he would have."

"But he made no promises? On the telephone, he was heard to say the matter could not be as urgent as you represented it to be, and must wait till tomorrow."

As Wright pursued this line, Nigel scrutinized Harold Loudron The smooth face, the dapper figure, the uniform dark suit—one saw hundreds of this type streaming across London Bridge in the rush hour, with their bowlers and rolled umbrellas and briefcases and copies of the *Financial Times*—an anonymous army, an army of ants swarming toward their mysterious occupations. That was the word for Harold—"anonymous." What personality was concealed behind the uniform clothes, the subfusc, evasive jargon? No one who keeps prefacing his remarks with "frankly" can be trusted an inch, thought Nigel, the Martini-and-smoked-salmon brigade; the I'm-not-in-business-for-my-health battalion; the sailing-near-the-wind flotilla.

A steam whistle roared. From his window seat, Nigel saw a cargo liner approaching, port, starboard, and masthead lights jeweling the dusk.

"I believe you have a motor launch?" Wright was saying.

"Yes She's laid up for the winter, though."

Wright asked for the name of the yard. He strolled over to the window,

now almost filled by the approaching ship "Lovely view you have" Wright gazed down a moment at the river lapping the wall from which Harold's house front rose.

"You were at home here the night your father died?"

"That is so."

"Both you and your wife? No visitors?"

"Quite. We had dinner, then we played Scrabble a while, and later watched a television play till bedtime."

"What would you say if I told you we have information that Mrs. Loudron was not here all the evening?"

Harold Loudron seemed to be groping so hard for the right facial expression with which to receive this that he could spare no energy for a reply.

"—that she visited your father's house?" Wright persisted.

A covert look of relief was instantly replaced by one of indignation.

"We have already told the police we were at home all the evening It appears that someone is trying to make trouble for my wife and I"

Nigel shuddered inwardly at the appalling solecism.

"Who told you this?" Harold continued.

"Information received, sir."

Nigel observed that Wright, always on for a bit of gamesmanship, had been countering Harold's business English with heavy strokes of official police jargon during this interview.

"Why on earth should my wife go out in a fog like that? It's ridiculous."

"I couldn't say. We must ask her."

Wright cut short Harold's protests, got his reluctant consent to be fingerprinted, and then asked the sergeant to fetch Mrs. Loudron.

"It's all right. I'll get her," said Harold hurriedly.

"Thank you, sir. The sergeant will go with you, then . . . And that's put a spoke in *his* wheel," Wright added when they had gone out "Pompous young smoothie."

"You don't look at *all* like my idea of a policeman," said Sharon as she disposed herself on the sofa.

"Oh, we come in all shapes and sizes at the Yard, ma'am."

"What have you been doing to poor Harold? He looked perfectly devastated."

"Giving him the third degree," replied Wright amiably.

"And now it's my turn. Goody" Sharon languished at the Inspector.

"Just so, Mrs Loudron. Now tell me first about the night your father-in-law died. How long did you stay in his house that night?"

Sharon's long red nails screeched on the marble-topped table beside her

as she convulsively drew back the hand that was reaching out languorously in Wright's direction.

"Damn! Now I've broken a nail. What were you saying?"

Wright repeated the question.

"Oh, that's absurd. I never went out that night. The fog was hellish. Harold and I had a homey evening We had dinner, just the two of us, and then we played Scrabble and watched a television play"

"Yet we have two witnesses who heard your voice in Graham Loudron's room at about 9:45 P.M."

"Two witnesses! This is insane What in hell's name should I be doing in Graham's room?"

"Perhaps you went to fetch that record he'd promised you." Nigel's mild comment got a quite staggering reaction. Sharon's face went suddenly haggard, the color of dead ash, fury and fear chasing one another across it Her hands trembled as she lit a cigarette and plugged it into a long holder. At last she got herself under control.

"Will someone tell me what all this is about?" she asked, in a husk of her usual hoarse drawl.

"Yes That night we all had dinner together, Graham Loudron told you he'd be getting that record for you 'in a few days,' and you said you could hardly wait for it What was the record, by the way?"

"How can I remember? Some record or other" Her eyes rolled sluggishly in her head.

"Had he got it for you when you went there?"

"No. Yes, I mean."

"Could we see it?" asked Wright, who had not the faintest clue to all this, but admirably concealed it.

"I haven't got it. I left it there."

"So you *were* there the night Dr. Piers was murdered?"

"I—no, it was another night. I remember now."

"But you did go to Graham Loudron's room on the night in question? The night Dr. Piers—"

"For Christ's sake, will you two stop pestering me, confusing me!" The woman almost shrieked it, her hands over her ears.

"Which room do you keep your gramophone in?" asked Nigel. "I don't see one here."

"We haven't got a bloody gramophone."

"What were you going to play the record on, then?"

Silence.

"Perhaps 'record' was a code word between you and Graham for something else?" suggested Nigel.

Wright gave him a warning glance. "I don't think we'll pursue this any further at the moment. Mrs. Loudron does not seem very well I'll come back tomorrow, Mrs Loudron, for another chat, and we can take your fingerprints then."

7. *A HOUSE IN THE ISLE OF DOGS*

Nigel walked through the white-tiled, echoing tube, lighted by a long succession of electric globes in its roof—a roof upon which, so he felt, millions of tons of water must be relentlessly pressing. The Greenwich tunnel was almost empty at this time of the morning a few boys skylarking at the far end, their hoarse shouts bouncing along the tube toward him; a few housewives ambling behind him with their shopping bags, these might have been extras in an early German expressionist film, heavy with symbolism, in which the hero was shown walking through an endless, monotonous tube, casting grotesque shadows upon its curved, white-glaring walls—walking alone, isolated in some obsessional neurosis, through a tunnel that had no outlet, on a mission whose end he had no knowledge of.

Nigel shook himself out of these morbid imaginings. His mission had a quite definite purpose. "You like burrowing into the past," Wright had said the evening before after the interview with Harold Loudron and Sharon. "Well, you go and have a talk with Graham's old tart tomorrow. I shall be busy elsewhere " Wright had not been too pleased with Nigel's jumping the gun at that last interview. He did not wish Sharon to know what the police suspected about her relationship with Graham Loudron, and Nigel's suggestion that "records" might be a code word between them could have put her on her guard. "But, my dear chap," Nigel had protested, "I said that to force them into the open. If she tries to communicate with him now, you'll know there's something in it. You'll have them both under observation, I take it, and you've got a man on the telephone extension at Number 6 "

The lift took him and the housewives up to the surface. Strolling into the Island Gardens, he looked across the water. The two wings of the Palace faced him, battleship gray in the sunshine, surmounted by their twin towers, the white ensign flying Between and beyond them stood the Queen's House in its plain, incomparable elegance; and on the hill high above, the statue of General Wolfe, with Wren's observatory beside it, held the skyline. Wolfe, the ailing, daring soldier, killed at his hour of spectacular triumph; and in the Palace over there the body of Nelson had lain, on its journey between Trafalgar and the tomb, while his rough seamen swilled grog and damned their eyes and wept like babies

A smart black ship, with the label of the General Steam Navigation

Company on its funnel, swept past toward the Pool of London. A Finnish tramp, its tall funnel heavily smoking, its hull rusty and patched, was moving in ballast downriver, the half-submerged screw sullenly thumping the water. A collier was unloading at the Greenwich power station, the clatter of whose conveyors could be distantly heard; high up on the Heath-Robinsonesque structure a traveling crane shifted, then let down its grab to gorge out coal from the bowels of the ship. To its right, the oily water smoothed over the place where the body of Dr. Piers Loudron had been salvaged from the river. A quick-fire burst of riveting rattled across from a shipyard near the Trafalgar Tavern where lighters were being repaired. Away to the left, a piercing, blue-white eye opened—the dazzling flame of a welder's burner.

Nigel walked out of the gardens, turned left, and presently right, down Barque Street into West Ferry Road. Here he turned right again, passing the ends of Schooner Street and Brig Street, and came to Yawl Street. These romantically named streets, running south from West Ferry Road toward the water front, had been knocked to bits in the early blitzes of the war. The dingy houses still standing were interspersed with scrofulous patches of grass, tumbled brick, bald foundations. Apart from its name on a wall, Yawl Street hardly existed, but at its far end Nigel saw a house standing, like a single, decaying stump in an otherwise toothless jaw This must be Nellie's house, unless Graham had given them a false address

The bell jangled. A yellow face appeared momentarily at a ground-floor window, then the dirty muslin curtain was pulled back again. Presently a girl of sluttish appearance opened the door; her body slouching against the doorpost, her ankles turning over above the pin-heeled shoes, she regarded Nigel with a sort of lifeless insolence.

"Nellie in?" he asked

"No."

"When will she be back?"

"Search me. What d'you want with her?"

"A friend of mine, Graham Loudron, gave me her address."

"Never heard of him. She expecting you?"

"I couldn't say. Are you on the telephone?"

"Telephone! Listen to him! This ain't the Ritz, mister"

So, unless Graham had written to Nellie, or walked over since the interview yesterday morning, he could not have warned her.

"Nice shoes you've got. Really smart," he said.

"They're bloody killing me, I don't mind telling you," replied the girl.

"One must suffer to be beautiful."

"Come again?"

"Old French saying. *Il faut souffrir pour être belle.*"

The girl giggled—she couldn't have been more than fifteen—and prinked at her elaborate, messy hairdo. "*Oh la, la,*" she replied; then looked vague, almost inanimate again. "You want Nellie?"

"That's the idea."

"She's out shopping Be back in half an hour. You like to wait?" she added, in a tone of harsh, slum coquetry.

"I'll come back later."

"What name shall I say?"

"Tell her it's a friend of Graham Loudron's. The name's Percy Popocatepetl."

"Get out!" laughed the girl, hugely delighted. "That's a bleeding mountain. Had it in a poem at school."

"Tell her the mountain'll come to Auntie Mahomet at eleven "

"Hey," said the girl, who seemed disposed to make Nigel linger, "I seen you before somewhere. You a television personality?"

"Never been so insulted in my life," returned Nigel, beaming at her. " 'By."

He took a bus that ran through Poplar to the north end of the Blackwall Tunnel. From the front seat on top he scanned the sprawling vistas of the borough: "a mighty maze without a plan." These were rows of dun little houses at all angles, depressing as those of a northern industrial town thrown up in the early nineteenth century to house the new wage slaves. There were signs of the terrible East End bombing—derelict spaces, acres of prefabs. Away to his left, over a high grassy rampart, showed the masts, funnels, and white upper works of steamers in dock. Warehouses and timberyards streamed past, Victorian tenements and blocks of flats built since the war. The bus, rounding a bend, moved cautiously over a swing bridge across an inlet that ran from the Thames, now visible again, to a ship-lined basin. Everywhere there were congregations of cranes altitudinizing against the sky line, stiff-necked as giraffes, inclining their heads to pluck heaven knew what exotic produce from out the holds of ships

What a muddle it all looks, thought Nigel; what diversity of occupations, all higgledy-piggledy, going on under my nose here, and I don't know the first thing about them. Like this damned Loudron case The romantic rubbing shoulders with the workaday; the beauty of ships interleaving the drabness of slums Is there anything so exciting in the world as to see a ship steaming past the end of a street?

The bus stopped. Nigel got out. Beyond the roadway running up from the Blackwall Tunnel, a huge loading shed stood, "Coast Lines Seaway" in

white letters on its sides, and above it the mast of a vessel flying a flag of blue, white, and red in horizontal stripes. Waiting for the next bus back, riding back on it, Nigel debated with himself how he should approach the unknown Nellie; what on earth *could* he say to her? Would she throw him out on the first suspicion that he was trying to pump her? For all that, a pleasurable excitement rose in him after he had rung the jangling bell. Nigel's insatiable interest in human beings had pulled him into many strange situations before now—situations in which he was helped, however, by his natural bent for approaching the new without preconceptions, for taking people as he found them.

Nellie was certainly something to take—a large woman, her hair dyed the color of brass, lax in movement, but with a disconcerting sharpness in her gray eyes. She wore a tight black satin dress, from whose décolletage her exuberant breasts threatened to burst out whenever she leaned forward. Pushing an enormous ginger tom off an armchair, she asked Nigel to sit down.

"Graham sent you, the girl told me." Nellie watched him carefully. "Would you be wanting a room?"

"No, it's not that."

"I thought not. You're hardly the type, are you?"

"And Graham didn't exactly send me. He gave me your name and address. I wanted to have a talk with you."

"I'm not in business now, you know, dearie."

"The loss is ours," Nigel answered, appreciatively eying her opulent surfaces.

Nellie broke into a rich laughter that rippled her bosom. "Go on with you! Well, Mr.—er—"

"Strangeways."

"Can I tempt you to a glass of port?"

"That's very kind of you" Nigel loathed port, and never more than at eleven in the morning.

Nellie tottered over to a cupboard, her almost oval figure on top of the small ankles and feet giving her the look of one of those children's Humpty-Dumpty toys weighted so that they always come back to an upright position. Nigel glanced out of the window, which overlooked the Island Gardens and the river, then round the room; it was furnished with an expensive suite of armchairs and sofa, two budgerigars chatted away in a hanging cage; the air was scented and stuffy.

"Cozy up here, isn't it?"

"Not so bad," replied Nellie, handing him a glass. Her little finger

refinedly crooked, she raised her own. "Mud in your eye. Mind you it's not a class neighborhood. But I got the house cheap just after the war—been saving for years—and it suits me all right."

"So long as the lodgers pay up."

"That's right. Mind you, one gets all sorts. But they're nice boys, most of them—don't give any trouble—particularly the spades."

"I'm glad you don't have a color bar."

"Not me." She chuckled comfortably. "Nellie the Ever-Open Door—that's me. We're all the same underneath the skin, I always say."

"Except that some have kind hearts and others blocks of stone."

"Well, there's that," said Nellie, beaming at the implied compliment. "Though, mind you, a girl doesn't get anywhere if she's too soft. I always tell my boys, this isn't Liberty Hall, if you start a brawl, out you go on your ear; same if you don't pay up regularly. Course, most of them are only here a few days at a time, while their ships are in dock, and I'm not too fussy about what they bring in at night; live and let live, I always say. But I can tell you, Mr.—er—"

"Call me Nigel."

"I can tell you, Nigel, girls nowadays—why, they're immoral as cats." She rolled up her eyes. "Go with any fellow for a pair of nylons, half these misses round here will. Now, when I first went on the bash, you knew where you were, a girl was either in the business or she was pure. The war changed all that. Why, with so many amateurs knocking around, we brasses couldn't get near our beats."

"Dilution of labor."

"That's right. And now with this Wolfenden stuff, the game's not what it was. All they need's an advert in the tobacconist's window and a telephone and Bob's your uncle."

"Saves their feet, though."

"There's that. But, say you work with a telephone, you can't pick your clients. You might be getting one of those blokes with glaring eyes who just want to come after you with a hammer. Well, drink up, dearie, and have another."

Nigel drank up Nellie took his glass, but stopped by the side window.

"There's Abdul going out."

"Abdul?"

"One of my regulars He's a Lascar That's how I got to know Graham"

A few months ago, said Nellie, she had gone into Abdul's room and found Graham Loudron with him. Graham and Abdul had come across each other in the Seamen's Hospital, where the latter was a patient. Nellie

got talking with them, and they discovered that she had known Graham's mother, Millie, during the war.

"Well, it's a small world, isn't it? But I expect Graham's told you all about this."

"No. He's not very communicative," Nigel replied. "But I gather he must have had a pretty hard time before Dr. Loudron adopted him "

"Yes. He doesn't talk about it much. But after Millie died, he was sent away to some kind of—what do they call it? I don't know. He was five or six by then. Millie's family wouldn't take him, they were Holy Joes, Chapel—the sort that kicks what they call Fallen Women in the teeth. Anyway, this place Graham was sent to, talk about concentration camps! Poor little bleeder! Half starved, beaten regular. Shameful. He had five years of that. Then he ran away and started breaking into shops. They caught him, and he got the wrong sort of magistrate, so then he had a spell in a reformatory. Never think it to look at him now, would you?"

Indeed I would, thought Nigel, the cold watchfulness, the faintly mocking obsequiousness, the habit of keeping everything locked up—in his room and in his mind. He said, "Who was his father, then? Did Millie ever tell you?"

A hard, inimical look came slowly into Nellie's gray eyes. She put down her glass of port on the table beside her. "Just what are you after? What's your stake in this? Did *you* ever know Millie, by any chance?"

Nigel, taken aback, gazed at the woman's suddenly hostile face. Then, very seriously, he said, "It's all right, Nellie, don't worry I'm not Graham's father, if that's what is on your mind."

Her eyes scrutinized him for a few seconds more—eyes long used to summing up men.

"I believe you," she said at last. "But I'd like to know what you've come here for then."

"To talk about Graham. I know the family, and they've asked me to help with the inquiries about their father's death."

"Are you police?" she asked, still on her guard.

"I've worked with them. And sometimes I've found myself working against them. But do stop looking at me, old dear, as if I was the man with the glaring eyes."

A convulsion, which seemed to start at the neat ankles and work its way, gathering force, up her body, shook Nellie. "Gawd! Don't make me laugh!" She slapped her bulging left breast, as if to admonish it not to leap out at Nigel, which it showed every sign of doing She quivered and gasped with titanic laughter. "You'll be the death of me!"

When she had finally recovered herself, she began to talk freely about Graham Loudron's mother. Millie Robertson had lived a few doors away from her in East Greenwich. Just before the blitzes of September, 1940, they were both evacuated to a country town in the Midlands. Millie was then nineteen, and pregnant; Nellie a few years older. She had seen the younger girl through her trouble. Millie never spoke about the baby's father, but money orders came at regular intervals. At first the two had worked in a local factory, but when an American Air Force station was set up in the neighborhood, Nellie went back, with some relief, to her prewar profession. She took up with an Air Force sergeant, following him when he was moved to another camp. Six months later, revisiting the Midland town, she found Millie in a bad way; the girl had developed tuberculosis and could work no longer at the factory, but she refused to go into hospital for treatment because she had no one to leave the baby with. Worse, her source of money then dried up. She had had to move her lodgings, and she suspected that her previous landlady was appropriating the money orders, or perhaps their sender had packed up on it.

"But didn't she write to him? He was the child's father, I presume."

"She did, once or twice, but there was no reply."

"Well, why didn't she go and see him? Tell him what had happened?"

"She was soft, that's why. A girl can't afford to be soft—not where men are concerned. Present company excepted, dearie."

"But—damn it—"

"I remember her saying to me—it was about the only time she talked about him—she said, 'No, Nellie,' she said, 'I won't be no millstone round his neck He's a good man. But he's not for my sort. I fell for him, and I had my romance with him, and I'm not going to ruin his life.' "

"She sounds a bit soft, certainly."

"Don't you believe it," replied Nellie, with sudden violence. "Forget what I said about soft That girl was a bloody angel. Never groused, never turned nasty; do anything for you, she would. I'm tough a old bag, Nigel, and I've always been tough But I know a——angel when I see one, if you'll pardon my language And don't talk to me about whores with hearts of gold; there's no such thing If there was, *I'* d not have left her that time; I'd have done something about it, but I was mad about this Air Force chap, and so—" Nellie shrugged her monumental shoulders

"So what happened to Millie?"

"Use your loaf, ducky. She went on the game, too. What else could she do, without she was separated from her little boy. She doted on him, see? She couldn't have given him half what she wanted to give him if she'd gone

on Public Assistance." Nellie took out a heavily scented handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. "Course, she was too ill for it. You need to be strong as a horse. So she died. I only heard about it some time afterward. She wasn't one for writing letters much, but she did write to me once or twice in that last year—all about the little boy, how he was getting on, you know—never a word about herself. Here, for Christ's sake, let's have another glass of port."

"What did Millie look like?" inquired Nigel when his glass had been refilled. "Have you a photograph?"

"No. Wish I had She was—she was like a flower One of them narcissuses. Pale and delicate looking. Sweet all through. You'd have liked her. How those Holy Joes managed to produce her is a fair mystery to me. God! it turns me up, calling themselves Christians and then dusting her off their fingers just because she'd tripped up."

"Does Graham take after her?"

"In looks, a bit."

"But only in looks?"

"Well, he's got nice manners. Course, that Dr. Piers gave him a good education. But he's a cold number, don't you think? Millie was warm as a stove."

"Still, he likes to come and hear you talk about her."

"That's true. But it gives me the creeps sometimes. He sits here, just as you might be sitting, and stares at me—well, like a kid when he asks you to tell a story you've told him over and over again till you're fair sick of it."

"He never talks about his father?"

"No fear. But he knows what I think about the rat, whoever he is. Course, he may be dead by now."

"I meant his adopted father. Dr. Piers."

"Not much. He did ask once if Dr. Piers had been our doctor when we lived in East Greenwich."

"Yours and Millie's?"

"That's right. She *was* a patient of his, as it happens And now, dearie"—the gray eyes were shrewd again—"it's my turn to ask a question. Did Graham do him in?"

Nigel's pale-blue eyes looked at her steadily. "We don't know. We're not even certain yet that it was murder at all. The old man had a lot of money; he left it equally among his children, so all the Loudrons had that motive."

"Ah, well," she said comfortably, "it'll all come out in the wash "

"What happened to your chap?" asked Nigel, after a pause. "The American sergeant?"

"He got his in one of those daylight raids."

"I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. I've almost forgotten him now. He was married, anyway. And he knew I was a brass," said Nellie a bit bleakly.

"I must go. Thank you for talking to me. Why don't you come over and have tea with us one day at Greenwich?"

"Me?" She chuckled sardonically but looked pleased. "What'd your wife say?"

"She'd like it. She's all right."

"I guess you're not so bad yourself."

On an impulse, Nigel put his hands on her shoulders and gave her a kiss "Good-by for the present, Nellie. I'll drop you a line about tea. Will you do one thing for me?"

She nodded, her plump fingers smoothing the cheek beside her mouth.

"If Graham comes over, don't tell him what we've been talking about. Just say I came to ask if he'd been with you last Saturday night. He was, wasn't he?"

"Yes. I gave him a room I had empty. O.K., dearie, mum's the word. But—"

"Yes?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking, maybe it's a mercy for Millie that she isn't alive. I don't go for Graham much, you know, but he is her boy."

"Don't worry, old dear. I'll do what I can for him."

Nigel walked down the seedy staircase, out into the Island Gardens. As he waited for the lift to take him down into the tunnel, he studied the regulations. One clause took his fancy: "No person shall drive or conduct into the tunnel any cattle, or any animal forming part of a menagerie, or any wild animal."

Now, who would want to, he asked himself. Not that it wouldn't be agreeable to drive or conduct into the tunnel a tiger, a prize bull, or a herd of giraffes.

When he got home, Clare kissed him. "My goodness, you've been drinking port."

"Yes, with an old tart in the Isle of Dogs."

"Oh, yes? Was she nice?" asked Clare, interested.

"You really are a jewel among women, my darling."

"Am I? Why?"

"Any other woman would have said, '*How* old is she?' or 'You know port disagrees with you.' "

8. *LABYRINTH OF LIES*

At six o'clock that evening, Inspector Wright looked in for a drink and a chat. He had interviewed Sharon Loudron again that morning. She admitted now that she had been in Graham's room from about 9:10 on the night of his father's death till 10:30, when she had let herself out by the back gate so as to avoid passing the study door, for her brother-in-law James often sat there at night. She had noticed that the garage doors were open, and was near enough to see, despite the fog, that both cars were in there. It was clearly a clandestine proceeding, but Wright, during the interview, allowed it to be tacitly assumed that Sharon had visited Graham for sexual reasons; he did not want either of them to suspect yet that the police might give a different meaning to their code word "record."

Following Nigel's visit that morning to Nellie, an Inspector of the Narcotics Squad had made immediate inquiries there about Abdul the Lascar, in whose room Nellie had met Graham. "Abdul" turned out not to be his real name; he was already on board his ship, due to sail in a few hours, and the Inspector did not interview the man, contenting himself with a search of his room, which proved fruitless; he wanted to catch the man with drugs in his possession, not to frighten him off; when his ship returned next, there would be a reception committee for Abdul.

"I admit it's a bit odd—Graham Loudron consorting with a Lascar," said Nigel. "But there's no *evidence* that either of them is in the dope trade. Even if they are, you'll have a job finding it; presumably Graham would have passed the stuff on by now."

"Well, there's no trace of it in any of those locked cupboards of his. And Jackson has had a good look in the obvious place—"

"Obvious place?" asked Clare.

"Dr. Loudron's dispensary. Hide illicit drugs amongst the lawful ones. No sign of it. Jackson's investigating the cellars at Number 6 now—tapping and measuring the walls—all that caper Might be a secret cache"

"All of which, if Graham *is* in the dope racket, will tell him he's been rumbled," said Nigel.

"Oh, no. Jackson's given out that he's searching for the missing diary pages By the way, only two sets of prints on that casebook—Dr. James' and his father's."

"Why should Graham go in for that sort of thing?" asked Clare slowly. "Not for money; he got a good allowance from his father."

"Excitement? Sense of power?" Nigel replied. "He had a bloody time as a boy, kicked around by everyone. You could get your own back on society by corrupting individuals."

"Maybe. But it's not strong enough as a motive, is it? For killing his father, I mean?"

"Why not?" said Wright. "Dr. Piers would have cut his daughter off with a shilling if she'd married Walter Barn. Wouldn't he have done the same to his adopted son if he'd found out that Graham was dealing in hemp?"

"I'm not so sure," Nigel frowned. "The old man had shown Graham such a special indulgence in the past—when he was sacked from school and walked out of one job after another. Still, you may be right. If only we knew what he wrote on those diary pages! Perhaps that he'd found out about Graham, and somebody else discovered the diary and salted away those missing pages to blackmail Graham with."

At this point the telephone rang. A message for Chief Inspector Wright. He came back looking pleased with himself. "Another of our friends not where he was supposed to be."

Inquiries at the Exchange had disclosed that on the night of Dr. Piers' death a long-distance call had come for Harold Loudron's number at 9:25, but there had been no reply from his house.

"Now that really is something," said Wright. "Particularly as the Fraud Squad tell me Harold's business affairs smell very fishy indeed."

"Have you given his car a going over?"

"It's the next job. We'll make that Jaguar wish it had never been born."

Harold Loudron received them in the room overlooking the river. It seemed to Nigel even more unreal, even more like a room left over from some Ideal Home for the up-to-date exhibition, than when he had first seen it. Looking left from the window, he observed the mast and rigging of Harold's derelict barge, with the green "Wreck" flag dangling from its yard.

"You told me, Mr Loudron, that on the night your father died you were here with your wife," said Wright, in his flintiest tones.

"Since then," Harold answered, with an absurd attempt to stand on his dignity, "my wife has informed you, I understand, that this was not entirely correct."

"She paid a visit to your father's house?"

"She was out of this house from nine o'clock till about 10:45. I have no evidence where she went."

"Come, come, Mr. Loudron. Didn't she tell you where she was going, or where she had been?"

"I didn't know that you accepted hearsay evidence, Inspector."

"I'm not a court of law, sir Please don't prevaricate with me"

"Well, then, my wife did say she'd pop along to Number 6"

"Were you not surprised at her venturing out in such a bad fog? Had she some urgent reason for visiting your father?"

Harold's eyes flickered. He got up and, walking to the mantelshelf, lit a cigarette with an expensive table lighter that stood there. "That is an embarrassing question, Inspector."

"You mean, because it was not your father whom Mrs Loudron went to see?"

Harold looked genuinely astonished, and for a moment his curiously anonymous personality came to life. "Not my father? I simply don't understand you."

It became evident to Nigel that Sharon had told Harold a story different from the one she had told Wright.

"Your wife had an urgent reason, then, for visiting your father? Something that couldn't be communicated by telephone or deferred till the next morning?"

"That is so, Inspector. Frankly, she thought she might be able to persuade him, if she saw him personally—he had a soft spot for her, you know—to help me out over the—er—temporary financial difficulties I have already spoken to you about."

"But she was unsuccessful?"

Harold nodded.

"She saw your father and he refused?"

"I presume she saw him," Harold cautiously replied. "When she got back, she said 'it was no go' Those were her words."

"All her words?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite—"

"You're telling me you had no further discussion with Mrs Loudron about the interview with her father-in-law?"

Harold looked more than a little uncomfortable. "My wife was very tired when she got back, and not—er—very communicative. I could see she did not wish to discuss the matter, so I did not press her"

"But the next day, Mr. Loudron—surely, at *some* time since that night, you have talked over her interview with Dr Piers?"

"Actually, no." Harold's expression was stubborn. "His disappearance and so on; they put it out of my head."

"But has it not occurred to you," Wright patiently asked, "that your wife may have been the last person to see your father alive? That her evidence is vital to this case?"

"Frankly," replied Harold, a boyish, almost shy look appearing on his face, "that is why we—why I decided to give a somewhat—er—simplified account of our movements that night. My wife is very highly strung, and I hoped to protect her from the distressing experience of—"

"Of having to tell the truth?" Wright's voice cracked like a whip, and Harold positively winced.

"I resent the tone of that remark," he said, recovering his normal pomposity. No one, thought Nigel, can be so absurdly pompous as a pompous *young* man.

"Well, then," said Wright. "Going back to your 'somewhat simplified account' of your movements—while your wife was out, you were here, in this house?"

"Certainly."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"All the time?"

"I've already said so."

"Yet a trunk call was put through to your number, and there was no reply," said Wright, who had been watching Harold, slit-eyed and tense as a cat about to pounce.

Harold swallowed. "Oh, it was a trunk call, was it?"

"So you heard the bell ringing?"

"Of course. I'm not deaf."

"But you didn't answer it?"

"No. I had a great deal on my mind I was concentrating on business problems, and I didn't wish to be interrupted."

"Do you happen to remember what time it was that the telephone bell rang?" asked Wright casually.

"Yes, just before 9:30. No, my watch was a few minutes fast. It would have been 9.25, I'd say."

Wright's saturnine hatchet face gave no inkling that he had just seen an apparently broken alibi rendered intact again by a few words. "May I use your telephone?"

"By all means. It's in the hall."

Wright went out.

"What does he want now?" asked Harold querulously.

"I imagine he's ringing up the Exchange to find out if anyone has rung

them from this house inquiring whether they had a trunk call for you that night, and, if so, at what time."

"Oh, I see. Well, he'll be disappointed. It's really most unpleasant, living in an atmosphere of suspicion like this."

"It must be. But you've rather brought it on yourselves, you two, haven't you?"

"I cannot accept that," said Harold stiffly. "It's quite natural for one to wish to protect one's wife from—"

"Are you only human when you're sailing boats or talking about them? Can't you come out from behind that façade?"

Nigel's deliberate provocation had its effect.

"Human? What the devil d'you mean? I love my wife, and—"

"And by fabricating this ridiculous tissue of fairy tales, you've let her in for a far worse grueling from the police than if you'd told the truth at the start. How d'you expect me to help you if I can't rely on a word either of you says?"

"Judging from my family's experiences so far," returned Harold sulkily, "we should be unwise to anticipate any assistance from your quarter."

"Oh, for God's sake, stop talking like the chairman at an annual general meeting! I just haven't time for all this managerial jargon. It may go down all right with the pin-striped types in the City, but—"

"How dare you talk to me like that! I will not have these damned insulting remarks! Get out!" Harold's suave surface had at last begun to crack all over.

"That's more like it," said Nigel equably; and to Inspector Wright, who had just come in, "I was pinching Mr. Loudron to see if I was only dreaming him."

"Mr Strangeways appears to have taken leave of his senses, Inspector."

"Ah, yes, sir. He does give that impression at times May I have the keys to your car?"

Harold's bewilderment could not have been more total if he had been confronted by a whole gang of goons. However, he finally handed over the keys, informing Wright that the Jaguar had been washed and cleaned inside by the East Greenwich Garage a week before, and that he kept the car parked in Pelton Road, having no garage. Wright, in return, told him that the Exchange had received no inquiries about the trunk call, except from the police.

"So that lets me out, I take it?" said Harold, glancing apprehensively at Nigel, who was looking as if he had been struck over the head with a mallet. It was, in point of fact, an exceedingly bizarre idea that had struck Nigel

"I'd like to have a word with Mrs. Loudron," he said.

"She's in bed, I'm afraid. A bit out of sorts."

"Be a good chap and ask her if she'll see me."

Wright went off to get his men to work on the Jaguar—a tiresome job of elimination that had to be done, even though it was almost certainly too late or unnecessary. It was only two days before that Wright had been called in, and he could hardly have been blamed for not putting Harold's car high on his list of priorities. Nevertheless, he did blame himself, and self-blame had the same effect upon Wright as a release of adrenalin—he drove his men and himself with yet greater energy through the tasks to be done. One man was sent to inquire whether the cleaners at the East Greenwich Garage had found any stains on the Jaguar's upholstery or mats, and while the experts worked on the car, Wright himself began to inquire at the houses near which it had been parked that foggy night.

Meanwhile, a rather disgruntled Harold had told Nigel that Sharon would see him, and took him up to her room Its combination of the functional and the luxurious, of modishness and sluttishness, made him recall by contrast the cluttered, dated, spotlessly clean bedroom of Rebecca Loudron. If Sharon was out of sorts, she certainly put a good face on it, sitting propped up in the huge low divan bed, bronze hair waterfalling about her shoulders, the pallor of her cheeks without make-up revealing the beautiful bone structure that Dr. Piers had commented on. Like many lovely women, in bed she looked curiously unsexy, defenseless, and ingenuous.

"You were foul to me yesterday," she said as soon as they were alone. "Well, don't stand about looking sheepish." She pushed a heap of glossy magazines off the bed onto the floor. "Come and make it up."

"I'm sorry you're not well," said Nigel, sitting down on the bed.

"Oh, I'm all right, really. I took to my bed to avoid any more scenes with that Inspector of yours. Now I rather wish I hadn't; Harold is so damned solicitous it sends me up the wall. He thinks you're mad, by the way. Are you?"

"Well, I *have* been getting some peculiar ideas."

Sharon eyes brushed over his face with the insolent, incurious glance of the spoiled beauty. "Oh?" she said, uninterested.

"Yes For instance, that you never went to your father-in-law's house at all the night he died."

"My dear man, if that's a sample of your peculiar ideas, I really shall have a headache After having had it dragged out of me that I did go there—"

"According to Harold, you went there to see if you could persuade his

father to cough up a large sum of money to rescue Harold from some financial disaster. Was that true? It sounds madly unlikely to me."

"Does it? Why?" she drawled. "Don't you think I'm capable of doing something to help my husband?"

"Oh, yes; and of course you'd be helping yourself too, wouldn't you?"

"What? Oh, saving myself from the bread line?" Sharon dismissed it with a petulant gesture. "It's not as bad as that. I could always have gone back to my job—modeling. But why do you say I never went to Dr. Piers' house?"

Nigel's pale-blue eyes gazed dispassionately at her. "It was your husband who went to see him. You stayed at home. That's how Harold knows the exact time the trunk call came through that night."

"Trunk call? *Now* what are you talking about?" Sharon looked genuinely mystified.

Nigel explained, adding, "It's Harold's only alibi. And very nice, too, considering he had the strongest reason of you all for wanting Dr. Piers dead. I only hope you *are* telling the truth: the police will chivy you like fury if they think you and Harold cooked up this tale between you."

"But why the hell shouldn't I be telling the truth? It wasn't much fun having to admit I'd been with Graham."

"Women are interested in the truth only when they can make use of it."

Sharon's green eyes stared boldly at him. "So you're an authority on the sex, are you?"

"I've made a lifelong study of it."

"In theory, maybe. What you need is a few practical lessons. Lock the door and take off your clothes."

"Is that what you said to Graham?"

"Ah, you're shocked, aren't you?" the husky voice jeered. "Frightened of getting involved in something you can't tie down with a string of platitudes?"

"So you did seduce Graham that night? Another scalp for you. I congratulate you."

Stung by Nigel's scathing tone, she cried, "Seduce? He's worth ten of you. He goes for what he wants."

"Meaning that I want you and daren't? Your vanity is pathological. Yes, I shouldn't be surprised if you haven't made up all this about yourself and Graham just to gratify it."

"You ask *him*, then."

"I'd rather ask you. If you can convince me you went to Number 6 that night, and slept with Graham, you'd probably convince the police too

Come on, tell me exactly what happened You didn't go there to wheedle money out of your father-in-law, I take it? That story was just to keep Harold quiet?"

"You really are the most extraordinary man"

"And you're a tremendously attractive woman. Let's take all that as read."

"You infuriate me, but I don't seem able to stay infuriated. Kiss and make up."

Nigel put his hands on her bare shoulders, which shivered under them, and kissed her hard, once. "Now, girl, to business. You went there to meet Graham. Secretly. And for some urgent reason, on a foggy night like that."

"Yes, sir."

"What reason?"

"He had something for me." Sharon was gazing into his eyes as if they hypnotized her.

"Had what? Apart from his youthful charm?"

"That's a secret. Give you three guesses."

"I'd need only one."

She winced a little, then gave him a defiant look "Well, it's my affair, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. And it'd be *my* affair if I lay down on an anthill and allowed myself to be eaten alive. Which is just about what you've been doing to yourself."

"Actually, I'm going to give up my anthill"

"Good. Well, you went to the house?"

She had let herself in at the front door and gone straight up to Graham's room, unobserved and seeing nobody. About ten minutes later, Graham came into the room. "He seemed—I don't know how to say it—madly above himself; you know what a cold number he usually is It gave me quite a turn."

"Manic?"

"Yes. I'd never thought of him as—well, a lover. Honestly. He just locked the door and grinned at me like a boy who has brought off a dare, and the next moment he'd sent me sprawling onto the bed. I couldn't do anything. I was so—so *surprised* I told him so, afterward"

"And what did he say?"

"I don't remember. He hardly talked at all. There was no tenderness. He made me feel as if—as if I was just a sort of instrument he was playing some triumphal march on Or as if he was taking revenge on me for something somebody else had done to him. A bit of both, perhaps It was awfully

queer. But exciting. I hate men to be respectful in bed—well, you know what I mean. Oh, yes, he did mutter something about his mother having been a tart. Yes, that never occurred to me; he was getting his own back on me, for her—treating me like one. Is that possible?"

"Quite possible. And then?"

They had made love several times. After this, Sharon crept downstairs and let herself out at the back door, so as to avoid passing the study In the passage leading past the surgery to the garden she stopped a moment, blinded by the fog, wondering if she would be able to get home; also, because she felt dazed by what had happened, and wished to find her own mental bearings again.

"I got my stockings wet," she absently remarked.

"Stockings wet?"

"Yes. I was standing just where the waste pipe runs down the wall into a drain, and it splashed me."

"This was at 10:30?"

"Near enough."

The splashing water had made her move on, through the garden, into the garage yard. She could just see that both cars were in the garage. The yard doors were closed, but not bolted.

"I wonder who was having a bath," said Nigel idly.

"Graham, I expect. No, how stupid of me. It was the waste pipe from Dr. Piers' bathroom." Sharon's eyes started wide open as she realized what she had said. "God! That never occurred to me! What does it mean? He must have been alive still, at half past ten "

Nigel was eying her with an attentiveness she found disquieting.

"Well, say something, Nigel. Don't you believe me? What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that waste pipe provides two pretty alibis For Graham and yourself."

"Oh, damn you! So you believe I've made all this up."

"You've made up so much—well, forget that, how do you know the water didn't come from some other bathroom?"

"Because it doesn't. When Dr. Piers had his bedroom and bathroom built above the annex, the plumbers fixed up a separate pipe to take the outflow."

"Ex-model's innocence established by waste pipe. Wonderful!"

"Why can't you be serious? You never thought I killed the old man, did you?"

"I keep an open mind."

Sharon was sitting bolt upright now in the bed. Her clenched fists beat on the coverlet "Oh, why won't you believe me! I swear I've been telling the truth."

"But I do believe you," said Nigel mildly. "Every word. You haven't the imagination to make up all that about you and Graham—what he said and the impression he gave you. How long was it from the time you left him till you got your stockings wet?"

"A minute. Less than two, anyway."

"Have you got the stockings?"

"Yes. But I've washed them since."

"Pity. Never mind. May I borrow them?"

"I suppose so. But really, you have the nastiest, most suspicious mind—"

"Inspector Wright has. The stocking *might* help to establish an alibi for Graham."

"How can they, when they've been washed?"

"You're not really interested, are you, in what happens to Graham?"

"Why should I be? He's been avoiding me since that night—hardly spoken a word to me. Not that I wanted him to. Honestly, it was all so queer, it gives me the willies to remember it."

"Are you afraid of him now?"

"Perhaps I am. I don't know—why should I be? It's just that he's not quite human. Like you," she added, smiling provocatively at Nigel, who ignored it.

"You're not afraid he'll force you to buy more records?"

"Records? Oh, I see. Records and anthills. No, what I'm afraid of is what they might do if they found I'd been *talking* about that little racket of his."

" 'They'? He and his associates, you mean?"

"Yes. Whoever they are."

"Well, I won't tell them. And now may I have the stockings?"

She got gracefully out of bed, her long legs exposed to the thigh by the short nightie she wore, and rummaged in a drawer. "I think this is the pair." She moved close to him, holding out the sheer stockings "Now," she said, looking up at him through her long eyelashes, "strangle me with a stocking. Wouldn't you like to?"

"I've felt like it sometimes."

"Why must you play hard to get?"

"Because I *am* hard to get."

"Don't boast You and I would be dynamite, and you know it. Shall I light the fuse?"

"And blow up Harold?"

Sharon gazed at him meditatively for a few moments. "Well, then, tell me why you want the stockings?"

"I don't really want them any more I wanted to see if you'd give me them."

9. *WHIFFS FROM THE PAST*

"But you don't even know if she gave you the right pair," said Clare later that evening.

"No. But I had a word with Wright as I came away. He's examining all her other stockings."

"What for? If she took part in the murder and got blood on them, she'd destroy them. If she told you the truth and just got them wetted by the outflow pipe, then I don't see—"

"There's another way she could have got blood on her stockings," said Nigel inscrutably

"This sphinx act is tiresome."

"You yourself made a suggestion a few days ago about how Dr. Piers might have died. . . . Now do you see?"

Clare's eyes had lit up. *"Oh!* Yes. But surely it'd be too diluted to leave stains."

"It almost certainly would. But we can't afford to take that for granted."

"Then Graham wouldn't have an alibi for that period?"

"No. Nor Sharon, of course But his alibi would only be partial, anyway—if she told me the truth, and I think she did for once."

"So either Dr. Piers was alive at 10·30, and had just had a bath, or—"

"Exactly."

Clare looked puzzled. "I still can't see those two as accomplices. What motive would they have—as a couple, I mean—for killing Dr. Piers?"

"If he'd found out about the drug racket?"

"Would that be really strong enough? For Graham, perhaps. But surely not for her?"

"I think I agree. No, I don't see them as accomplices. There's something Sharon said, though, while she was talking to me this evening. . . ."

Nigel told her what it was. Clare stared at him, chewing her lip. "Well, that's a nasty thought, isn't it, one way and another."

"Yes," Nigel slowly replied.

"But then, why move the body? Or, rather, who moved it?"

"The why reveals the who."

"Oh, come off it, darling."

"I think I know who put the body in the river."

"Well, come on, tell me."

He told her, and why, at some length. "But this doesn't help us much toward the identity of the murderer. We've still got Graham, and Rebecca and Walt Barn; and Harold, just possibly, though it'd be hard to get round his knowing the time of that trunk call; and of course, just possibly, James Loudron."

"And just possibly Dr. Piers himself?"

"Yes indeed. That's the trouble. But for the medical evidence, I'd go for suicide every time. I don't mind there being no exploratory cuts. But the equal depth of the two cuts—how does one get round that? He'd have had the resolution, but how could he have had the strength to make the second one?"

"How could he have had the strength to make the second cut?" Nigel inquired of Graham Loudron's impassive face.

It was the following day Wright had telephoned to say that the search of Harold's Jaguar had proved negative, the firm that cleaned it the previous week had noticed no suspicious stains on the upholstery or mats, and the occupants of the Pelton Road houses near which the car was parked had not heard any sound of its being driven away on the night of Dr Piers' death.

Now, in Graham's tidy and impersonal room at Number 6, Nigel faced what promised to be one of the most difficult interviews he had ever undertaken.

"So the police are baffled," murmured Graham, in his subacid way.

"For the time being. As I say, but for that one bit of medical evidence, they would probably accept suicide."

"And the dead body walked to the river and threw itself in?"

"What makes you think Dr. Piers killed himself in this house?"

Graham looked a triffle confused. "But I thought that was all settled. Harold's idea about his having had a brain storm and walked out to the river —do the police still believe that possible?"

"Does it seem to you any more improbable than that someone here should have found your father dead and gone to the trouble of dumping his body in the river?"

Graham considered it. "Well, I don't know," he said slowly. "It might be rather an embarrassment, professionally, for a body to be found in the house."

"If Dr. Piers' suicide would damage the practice, I don't see it could matter where the body was found."

"I expect you're right," said Graham indifferently.

Nigel got up, paced about the room, absently trying the locked doors of the cupboards, then walked over to the window, aware all the time of Graham's eyes following him.

"This tree must be lovely in summer," he said, looking out into the branches of the towering lime, where a troupe of sparrows were bickering.

Graham's mouth moved in a faint, disagreeable smile. He said nothing.

"Why do you keep everything locked?" asked Nigel, trying a cupboard handle again.

"It's my room. I suppose I can do what I like."

"You had no privacy in that hideous orphanage, or whatever it was they sent you to after your mother died And all the kids stole anything they could lay hands on. No doubt those are the main reasons."

"You are a student of psychology?" the young man inquired, with polite sarcasm.

"Didn't it ever occur to you that Dr. Piers was your real father?"

"Why should it?"

"But you're not surprised at the suggestion?"

"All I knew about my father—I don't remember my mother ever talking about him—was that he let her down; when I say 'knew' I mean 'guessed.' I never believed that stuff about his having been killed in the war. Anyway, it was obvious some man had let her down. I was a bastard; she had to go on the streets."

Graham's voice held no emotion, his eyes were still expressionless.

"Do you really believe Dr Piers was that sort of man?"

"No. I suppose that's why it never occurred to me he could be my father." The small fleshy mouth in the triangular face pushed out meditatively. "Of course, that would explain one thing."

"Yes?"

"Soon after I came here, I overheard James and Rebecca talking about their mother. I can't remember how it arose, but they mentioned a quarrel their mother had had with their father. It was about some letters Janet had intercepted and kept from him. Dr. Piers found out somehow that his wife had done this He made a flaming row, and never spoke to Janet again except asking her to pass the salt. She died about a year afterward."

"So that's why you said to the Inspector the other day that James' mother had died of neglect?"

"Yes."

"And you think those letters might have been from your mother, appealing to Dr. Piers for money, telling him she was very ill?"

"Well, it could be. Though, as I say, it hadn't occurred to me before"

"Really not?"

"I've just said so. Twice."

"Although Nellie talked to you about your mother, and told you Millie had written one or two letters to the father of her child, imploring him for money? You never linked up the two things in your mind?"

"So you've been worming information out of that old bag?"

"Do you despise everyone except yourself?" said Nigel, nettled.

"Don't preach at me," Graham coldly replied. "I take people as I find them, and—"

"You took Sharon as you found her, all right"

Graham's eyes narrowed. "Meaning?"

"You just walked into this room and raped her."

The young man grinned sourly at him. "The lady was only too willing."

"But otherwise my statement is correct?"

"I suppose so."

"Yet you told the police that you were already in this room when she arrived."

"I don't see the point."

"Now you agree that you walked in and found her here. Walked in from where?"

Graham laughed, stretching his arms up behind his head. "Oh, I see. I thought your phrase about walking in was metaphorical."

"Not a bit. Sharon tells me she waited for you here about ten minutes before you came in."

"She's congenitally incapable of telling the truth Anyway, all this is immaterial, isn't it? Oh, I see! During those ten minutes she alleges she waited here, I'm supposed to have been killing my adopted father?" Graham said it lightly, but his eyes were sticking to Nigel's with that limpetlike fixity again.

"You might have been. At any rate, there's ten minutes lopped off your alibi, if Sharon is telling the truth."

"She isn't."

"Why should she lie about that and be truthful about the rest of the episode?"

"Search me." Graham smiled, with a sudden and unusual charm, as if to take the offense out of his words. "Perhaps *she* was wielding the razor during those ten minutes."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"Of course not. My sister-in-law is much too ladylike for that sort of thing."

"What, in fact, did she come here for that night?"

"Not for what she got," replied Graham, his mouth reminiscently twitching.

"Well, what then? A nice chat?"

"You know damn well what she came for," said Graham, after a pause.

"The 'record' you'd promised her? A neat little parcel of—"

"You're saying it, not me."

"Did Dr Piers ever tax her with taking drugs?"

"I've no idea. Why not ask her?"

"He was a first-rate diagnostician. He must have noticed the signs. And then he'd start wondering who supplied her."

"This conversation is privileged, as the needle-noses say. I should of course deny that it ever took place," said Graham smoothly.

"And of course they'd take your word rather than mine? Not that the police could do much about it, unless they found drugs in your possession, or Sharon blew the gaffe to them. You've had plenty to time to cover your traces. And Dr. Piers is dead."

"All this is rather tedious. Supposing that I had supplied Sharon with drugs, which I do not admit, and supposing that Dr. Piers had found this out, d'you really think he'd have gone to the police about it? He was far too keen on the Honor of the Family."

"I daresay you're right. What really interests me is why you tried to make Sharon contract the drug habit."

Graham, watching Nigel, offered no comment, except the faint look of derision on his face.

"It could be," Nigel went on, as if to himself, "that after your unfortunate boyhood you feel a need to exercise power over other people, and Sharon was an obvious victim with her craving for new kicks On the other hand, it may be that you have a vindictive nature, and a strong motive for causing what havoc you can in the Loudron family; your grudge against Dr. Piers could easily extend over his children Well, we shall find out in due course."

During this chill analysis, the fruit-bat face betrayed a certain covert animation. Graham evidently felt more gratified to be the subject of discussion than offended by the terms in which Nigel had spoken.

"When you went with Rebecca to look for your father the morning after he'd disappeared, was she very upset?"

"Well, in a bit of a flap, yes."

"You looked in the bedroom. Then you both went into the bathroom?"

"No. I went by myself."

"Did you get the impression that Rebecca was nervous—apprehensive about going into the bathroom? Did she hang back?"

Graham gave him a calculating look before replying, "I can't honestly be sure about that."

"Well, then, when you told her Dr Piers was not in the bathroom, how did Rebecca react?"

"I don't remember that she said anything particular. She did look a bit stunned, I thought."

"But you wouldn't say she was afraid to enter the bathroom?"

"I—honestly, I can't tell you. At that time we weren't *badly* worried about my father's disappearance. It was still possible he'd gone out on an emergency call. We were just doing what the cops call a routine search."

"I see. And the night before, when—according to your story—you were sitting in this room and Sharon came in, what was her state of mind?"

"Good God, I'm not a mind reader. If you mean, did she look as if she'd just come from slitting my father's wrists, the answer is no." Graham's voice turned oddly peevish. "I simply can't understand why she should have told you I wasn't here when she came in. It's such a pointless lie. What do the police make of it?"

"She's not told them that bit yet, as far as I know. And just after she'd left you that night"—Nigel, moving to the window, looked out at the waste pipe running down the outside of the wall from Dr. Piers' bathroom on his right—"did you hear water splashing into the drain from that pipe?"

"Not that I remember," said the young man, after a pause. "I doubt if I could have, with my window shut. Why?"

"You realize that's the waste pipe from your father's bathroom?"

"Of course. But Sharon left about half past ten. He was dead by then"

"How do you know?"

Graham seemed unperturbed by this shattering question. "I don't *know.* I assumed it. After all, the old boy would hardly have got up again at 10·15 or so and run a bath, when he'd taken a sleeping draught and gone to bed immediately dinner was over Anyway, he always had his bath in the morning."

"Did he? That's interesting. You know, you're the one who has inherited Dr Piers' brains. Why on earth don't you do something with them, instead of these dead-end jobs you take up and drop?"

"I'm only twenty. Why should I, anyway? I don't owe society anything—not after the way it treated me for the first thirteen years of my life"

"But it must be so boring Don't you have any ambitions?"

"Not now," replied Graham.

"But you used to?"

"Oh, yes One ambition," said Graham, with a secret smile.

"What was that?"

"To be a first-rate jazz pianist and have my own band."

"I thought you were one. I'll never forget that night you played for us after dinner here. 'He was her man, and he done her wrong.' You were thinking about your mother when you plugged that refrain, weren't you?"

Graham, who had come out in the warmth of Nigel's praise and interest, now closed up again. " 'Frankie and Johnny' is a song about homosexuals," he coldly replied.

Five minutes later, Nigel was sitting with Rebecca Loudron, who had just come in from shopping In the elegant drawing room, where she had taken him, Rebecca looked out of place with her heavy limbs and country tweeds; she also looked, for no reason that Nigel could think of, on her guard. After a few polite formalities, made the more absurd both by her new *grande-dame* manner and by the cloud under which the Loudrons were living, she came out with, "I do hope the police will clear up this matter soon, Mr. Strangeways. People are beginning to talk in Greenwich."

"Unpleasant talk, you mean? About your family?"

"Yes. And they look at me in such a horrid way, some of them, in the shops."

"It must be wretched for you. But there's probably no malice behind it; only a sort of gloating curiosity. You must outface them. It'll die down soon."

"My father was very popular in the district," said Rebecca, with constraint. "They think one of us killed him, for his money."

"Which of you?"

"Harold. Or Graham But some are saying it was me; it's got round about my father's opposition to Walter."

"But, my dear girl, how do you *know* what they're saying? They don't say it to your face."

"They wouldn't dare " Her hands gripped the arms of the high-backed chair in which she sat bolt upright "No, one of Walt's friends heard talk, in a public house " Her formal manner suddenly cracked. "Oh, it's so beastly," she wailed. "How much longer will it go on? James is so dreadfully worried, I don't know what to do about him."

"Well, you've got Walter."

Rebecca's lip began to quiver. "I haven't seen him for nearly two days. How can he be so unkind!"

"He's busy, I expect," said Nigel soothingly

"He told me, last time I saw him, that he didn't think my having so much money would be good for him—for his painting," she said, in a frozen little voice.

"Well, that's a new line for him. But he hasn't broken it off, has he?"

"No. I don't know. Oh, I'm so miserable! All this suspicion, poisoning everything! He even—" Rebecca paused, twisting her handkerchief.

"He even suspects you? But you and he were together till midnight."

Rebecca's eyes swerved away from his. "Father could—it could have been done before I went back to my room after dinner," she muttered. "Or after Walter left. Couldn't it?"

"It might, I suppose. And, if so, Walter could have done it; that's what's really worrying you most, isn't it? Before you went up to your room, or on his way out of the house at midnight?"

Rebecca hid her face ashamedly in her hands.

"And he's saying that marriage to a rich woman would be bad for his painting, although he'd never been troubled about that before; you're afraid it might be because he killed your father, and then lost his nerve and is trying to cut away his obvious motive for doing so?"

She nodded, her face still buried in her hands. Yes, it could be that, thought Nigel; or it could be that Walter suspects her of having murdered Dr. Piers and is pulling out so as not to get further embroiled. Walter is one who likes not to be involved, particularly where the police are concerned. On the other hand, it was he who originally asked Rebecca to say she had been alone in her room that night. If Rebecca told the truth about that If.

Nigel decided he had come to an impasse on this line. "Tell me," he asked, "about this quarrel your father and mother had, a year before she died."

Rebecca's head went up as if sharply jerked by a bridle.

"Quarrel? How do you— I don't know what you mean."

"I'm all for loyalty. But blind loyalty can do appalling damage."

"I'd rather not talk about it. You'd better ask James. It's a private, family thing. He must decide whether you should be told about it."

"Can you give me an assurance that it is germane to this—to your investigations?" Dr. James Loudron asked, a couple of hours later.

"Certainly."

"Very well. But it's a painful matter to revive, even after all these years."

Dr. James sat at the head of the dining-room table, where he had just finished a scrambled lunch under the formidable eye of his dead mother, whose portrait hung on the wall behind him. Rebecca had not exaggerated

her brother's state; he looked positively hagridden, and his burly form seemed to have shrunk within his clothes.

He poured himself another glass of water, holding up the glass to the light as if measuring a dose. "Are you quite sure you won't have a bite of lunch? Becky could easily—"

"No, thanks. I go without lunch as often as not, and I never take more than a light one."

James gave him the automatic, professional eye. "Yes? Well, you look all right on it. I daresay we make too much fuss about a regular diet, though . . ." His voice trailed away.

"You're going to tell me about the quarrel"

"Yes. Ah, here's Becky with the coffee. You'll have a cup?"

"Thanks."

They sat in silence till his sister withdrew again. Then James, with a lunging movement of his body, which suggested the breaking from some shackles of inhibition, plunged into the story.

"It was about eight years ago. One evening. I was in my third year of training We were sitting in the drawing room after dinner—my mother, Becky, and I. Father came in with some letters in his hand. He was—I'd never seen anyone look like that before: white-hot with anger, but sort of frantic too, as if he'd just waked up and found himself buried alive. He walked over to my mother and shook the letters in her face. He said—look here, I *can't* see why you want to know all this."

"Never mind. Carry on."

"He said, 'Janet, I hope you realize you're a murderess, as well as a thief.' Mother said, 'I did it for your own good.' He said, 'You did it out of poisonous, despicable jealousy' I'll never forget their words, or their faces. It was terrible. We'd never seen them quarrel before—not in a deadly way like that They forgot we were in the room even, till Becky became hysterical. I had to take her out and calm her down; actually she was quite ill for several days afterward."

"So that's all you heard of the quarrel?"

"No I came down again. Father was still at it. I didn't go in. I—I listened at the door. I was afraid he might do her some physical violence and I thought I'd better be on hand."

"So you were able to piece the story together?"

"Yes Of course, neither of them said a word to any of us about it afterward But from then on my father treated Mother—well, as if she simply wasn't there. It was bitterly cruel; whatever she'd done, she didn't deserve that We had a miserable year Then she died. Of course, she had a

bad heart condition before, but she couldn't go on living, with my father behaving as he did."

Nigel watched James Loudron intently. The emotion released through that hagridden face was painful to see. The doctor was beyond embarrassment, gripped by a feeling that shook to bits his usual stolid, professional decorum.

"I take it," said Nigel, "that those letters were from a young woman who had had a child by your father and was appealing to him for help?"

"They were blackmailing letters," James grimly rejoined

"How do you know? You didn't read them."

"That's what Mother called them."

The two Millies, thought Nigel: Janet Loudron's blackmailing bitch; Nellie's sweet-as-Narcissus friend He said, "Your mother had intercepted the letters, then?"

Janet Loudron, according to James' account, must have opened the first of them quite by mistake. Two or three more came, which she was then on the lookout for. Dr. Piers, a few days before this hideous scene, had somehow got to hear of Millie's death in 1945. He must have wondered why she had never written to tell him that she was very ill and no longer receiving money from him: but suppose she had written, what could have become of the letters? There was only one answer to anyone familiar with Janet's possessive, moralistic, and ambitious nature. She would see Millie as not only an episode in her husband's past that must be hushed up but as a potential menace to his career as well as their marriage, it was not in her to feel the sweetness and unselfishness (if Nellie was right about Millie's character) that breathed through the letters. But why had she hidden, not destroyed them? Because, thought Nigel, their existence would represent for her a latent source of power over her brilliant and authoritarian husband; or perhaps simply because she was the kind of woman who keeps everything. Anyway, what did it matter now?

"You and Rebecca used to talk about this sometimes, after your mother died?"

"Yes. It was partly therapeutic. I mean, Becky had taken it very hard, as I told you. And I judged it was better for her to talk about it than to keep it bottled up."

"Very wise, I daresay. And one day Graham overheard you both discussing it."

"So *that's* how you knew—it would be Graham, the little bastard."

" 'Bastard'—do you realize what you're saying?"

James Loudron gave him a puzzled look. "Well, he *is* an absolute"—his slowish wits were visibly working—"good God, you're not suggesting—"

"Surely it must have occurred to you that Graham might be this girl Millie's child by your father?"

"What? Occur to me that my father would bring his bastard into our house and give him my mother's room to live in? I must say, you credit me with a pretty lurid imagination."

Nigel was unimpressed by this disclaimer, but did not say so.

"Well, your mother was dead. You father may have felt he must make some reparation to the other woman and her child."

"Yes, but damn it, Mother's own room! Talk about adding insult to injury!"

Nigel gazed steadily at him. "You took sides, didn't you?"

"Took sides?"

"You and Becky were against your father, on your mother's side, after the quarrel. And you still are, though they're both dead."

"What if I am?" James glared back at him with a kind of fuddled menace, almost as if his unwonted display of emotion had intoxicated him. Nigel let the silence protract itself.

"Well, what if I am?" James repeated. Then slowly, with the air of one who makes an almost incredible discovery, he went on, "You're not suggesting that I—that I've been saving up my bitterness against my father for the way he treated my mother—saving it up for eight years?"

"Savings accumulate," murmured Nigel.

"You must be mad. If I was going to kill him, I wouldn't have waited all this time Damn it, we got on quite reasonably well together—"

"Well, then, who did kill him? Whom have you tried to protect?"

James Loudron rose abruptly and lunged out of the room.

10. *THE NAKED AND THE DEAD*

For the third time Nigel rang the bell of the house overlooking the green expanses of Blackheath. He was about to turn away when the door at last opened.

"Oh, it's you," said Walter Barn "I was working. What d'you want?"

"To talk to you. I can come back later."

"Oh, that's all right. The best of the light has gone, anyway."

He led Nigel through a nondescript hall into a large room at the back of the house. The hard, cold north light came through French windows, mercilessly exposing an unmade camp bed, a gas ring with a dirty saucepan on it, muddy canvases on the walls, a kitchen table littered with paints, rags, jam jars full of brushes There was a smell of turpentine and poverty.

"Welcome to my humble abode," said Walt. "This is Louisa, known to her wide circle of undesirable friends as Lousy."

"How do you do?" said Nigel to the girl, who sat in an ungainly attitude upon a kitchen chair, stark naked. She glowered at him through a tangle of hair.

"Bloody cold, as you ask me," she vouchsafed.

Whether it was the north light, or the east wind outside that seeped into the room with a bone-piercing chill for which the ancient gas fire was no match, the girl's skin had a bluish tone.

"Who's this?" she growled.

"His name is Nigel Strangeways," said Walt. "He lives with Clare Massinger."

A trace of animation appeared upon the girl's doughy face.

"Clare Massinger? She's old hat now."

"You shut your silly mouth, Lousy. Massinger is first-class. What the hell do you know about it, anyway?"

"Peter says—"

"Peter knows as much about plastic values as this bit of linoleum." Bending down, Walt tore a strip off the rotting linoleum and slapped the girl smartly on the thigh with it "If you'd use your own eyes instead of bleating out a lot of second-hand judgments—"

"*When* you've finished," she complained.

"I have finished Put on your clothes and remove the body. This gentleman wants to talk to me."

"One of your Establishment friends, huh?" The girl stood up, revealing the stocky, broad-hipped figure, the thick legs, and low-slung buttocks beloved by painters. "I warned you what'd happen to your work if you got in with that lot. Peter says—"

"Peter!"

The girl put her hands on her hips, tossing back her hair and revealing a dirty neck. "All right. Marry your bloody heiress—and Annigoni won't see you for dust."

"I do believe this moronic cow is trying to be rude," remarked Walt. He seized the solid girl and held her up high, her legs kicking like a frog's, then deposited her among her clothes on the bed

"She needs her bottom smacked. You take first go?" Walt grinned at Nigel, wandering off to the easel "Color," he muttered abstractedly. "That's all very well. But you've got to *feel* it! Here!" He thumped his barrel chest. "Young Lousy—does she make you *feel* any color?"

"She looks blue to me," said Nigel.

"Nah. That's just her bad circulation Her father's a chartered accountant, believe it or not. . . . Figure studies . . She's in revolt against bourgeois respectability, or some such crap, so she sits for me and goes daubing in some God-damned art school. Pathetic, isn't it?" He scraped away at the canvas with his palette knife "Louisa, the queen of the layabouts . . . But, you mark my words, she'll end up in a semidetached in the suburbs, like the rest of them. Nappies in the bathroom and a loverly three-piece suite in the lounge."

"——to that," mumbled the subject of his remarks, drawing a thick sweater over her head.

"Yeah, she's burning with a hard, gemlike flame, like a lodginghouse gas jet. Just look at her! All rump and no radiance. Daresay Massinger could make something of her. But *I* need someone who'll squeeze the colors out of me—get it?—a model who's *asking* for vermillion and cobalt and chrome yellow. Poor Lousy gives off about as much passionate color as a loin of refrigerated mutton."

"If you could paint like you talk," retorted the girl, "you'd be in the Academy."

"Hah! Double-barreled insult You kill me. Run along now, Cleopatra. See you tomorrow."

"So long," said Louisa amiably, and, with a final glare at Nigel, departed.

"Well, there it is," muttered Walt. "Lar Vee Bohame. She can have it. Cup of tea?"

He unearthed a plate of buns from under a paint rag, filled a kettle, lighted the gas ring. Nigel studied the young painter's cannon-ball head, compact body, and neat movements.

"Well," said Walt as he poured out the tea, "how's things in the great world of crime and punishment? Found any more bodies?"

"Rebecca's very upset."

A wary look came into Walter's bright blue eyes. "She sent you up here?"

"No."

"Well, then? You on the Marriage Guidance lark? Have a bun."

"I can't make out whether you've broken it off with her or not. Have you?"

"What does she say?"

"That she hasn't seen you for two days. And what do *you* say?"

"That I haven't seen *her* for two days. So what? I don't have to live in her pocket."

"You'll beat up two newspapermen who molest her, but you won't stand by her when she's in real trouble?"

"I beat them up because journalists disgust me; it wasn't my chivalry." Walt's round head rolled on his shoulders "Hey, what's this you said? Real trouble? How d'you mean?"

Nigel gazed at him noncommittally, saying nothing

"You mean, they suspect her of doing the old man?" Walt persisted.

"Don't you?"

"Me? It's nothing to do with me." The piercing blue eyes stared defiantly at Nigel, then swiveled away.

"You know, somebody ought to sign you on for the freaks' show in a fair."

"I don't get it."

"Young man who says it's nothing to do with him when he suspects his fiancée is a murderess."

"Look here, I—"

"Is that why you're pulling out? Afraid of her?"

"This is just bloody crazy!"

"Or am I really expected to believe you had a change of heart and decided that a rich wife would be bad for your"—Nigel glanced at a grayish still life on the wall—"your Art."

"I shall probably knock your block off before you go But I'd like to know first why you find that idea so incredible."

"I don't. It's perfectly possible a rich wife might be the ruin of you. What I do find odd is that this should only have occurred to you a couple of days ago. The day after Rebecca's father disappeared, you came chasing round to ask me how soon you and Rebecca could get your hands onto his money. What happened in the interval?"

"Nothing." Walt Barn said it much too quickly.

"Well, I'll tell you. You started thinking about Dr. Piers' death. You realized that Rebecca might easily have caused it, either before she joined you in her room that evening, or after you left the house. You remembered the row she'd had with her father that day—how she sent for you, and you came along and found her in a murderous state of mind."

"No! Steady on! She was hysterical, I grant you. But not—"

"And then it occurred to you that she'd sent for you so as to provide her with an alibi of sorts for that evening. Had she ever asked you up to her room at night before?"

"No, as it happens. But—"

"You are aware that she has a passionate temperament, and a slightly unbalanced mind, and that she had two reasons for hating her father "

"Two reasons?"

"You didn't know that when her father and mother had a cataclysmic quarrel eight years ago, Rebecca got hysterics and was ill for some days after? That she has always believed he was responsible for her mother's death?"

"I don't know anything about that." Walt's eyes were glittering and inexpressive now, like mineralogical specimens Reaching out for his palette knife, he made stabbing motions at the wooden table. Nigel got up and walked over to the French windows; the garden outside, in the dour February light, was a mass of rank grass, bricks, balks of wood, rusting household utensils.

"I think Becky may have taken up with me," Walter was saying slowly, "because I was different from anything she'd come across—from her dad and the way they live there It was a sort of gesture of revolt. Like Lousy's from her chartered-accountant father. If Becky really hated her dad, as you say, it'd be a way of rolling him in the mud, wouldn't it?"

Nigel made no comment on this singular interpretation of Rebecca's conduct. He asked point-blank, "Are you breaking it off with her because you've got cold feet?"

"I've not broken it off."

"Because," Nigel persisted, "you're afraid that your coming in for her share of the old man's money would make the police suspect you?"

"Well, you have got a nasty mind," said Walter, with a flickering, evasive grin.

"Maybe. But it's the only explanation I can think of. You don't like getting mixed up with trouble, do you?"

"Who does?"

"Lots of people. Do you get the impression that Rebecca is a bit doubtful about you too?"

"Doubtful?"

"You had motive and opportunity for killing her father. And you persuaded her to tell the police she'd been alone in her room all that night. Wouldn't that make her suspicious about you?"

"Not on your life. She's in love with me," Walter replied, with a disagreeable complacence.

"So you're just going to sit tight on your little raft of non-commitment and let Rebecca drown."

Walter shrugged. "I've got to concentrate on my work. It's been going well since this happened All I want is a bit of peace just now."

"Which is what you won't get—not till the case is cleared up. If you want to let Rebecca carry the can for you, that's your business. But you can't paint out the fact that you and she are two of the chief suspects, the police will chivy you from here to judgment day till they find out the truth."

"——the police."

"Particularly," added Nigel, at a venture, "when Sharon comes out with the full story."

"That bitch. She'd say anything" His eyes glittered at Nigel like blue glass. "So it *was* her in Graham's room?"

"Yes. And I'm convinced she saw or heard something that will lead the police to the murderer."

"Well, why doesn't she tell them?"

"She's like you. All for Number 1 and a policy of non-involvement."

"Except with young Graham. I should watch that bird, if I were you. He's the killer type. A psychopath, I shouldn't be surprised"

"You think he killed Dr. Piers?"

Walter Barn gave Nigel a look both calculating and impish "Well, I saw him come upstairs about ten past nine that night."

"Which proves that he had just murdered his father?"

"I'd nipped out of Becky's room to go to the john. Its door faces the head of the stairs. When I came out, I saw him walking up from his father's room and going into his own."

"Very sinister, I'm sure."

"Yes. He had a ghastly grin on his face, and blood dripping from his hands."

Nigel gazed contemptuously at the young painter. "Why don't you grow up? You're not even amusing as a clown."

"Just taking the micky out of you, mate I don't like bloodhounds and I don't like intellectuals. A combination of the two makes me sick to the stomach. Now run along and be inquisitive somewhere else, sod you."

Nigel realized that Walt was about to explode with demoniac violence; the round face had gone white, the broad shoulders were hunched in menace. As he finished speaking, the young man made a sudden pass with the palette knife, his wrist turning upward, at Nigel's face. Sidestepping, Nigel brought the edge of his hand down on the inside of Walt's wrist, with such force that the knife flew to the floor and its owner doubled up in agony, thrusting his wrist between his thighs to alleviate the pain.

"Christ! You've broken it, you bastard!"

"Nonsense. You'll have a bruise, that's all."

Walt soon straightened up. One arm dangling, he came at Nigel, who straight-armed him, the heel of his hand cracking against the bridge of Walt's nose, and stopped him as if he'd been nailed to the floor.

"All right," said Nigel. "Calm down. You're tough. But I'm not a yellow-bellied newspaperman."

Walt shook his head to clear it. He looked dazed, but not a bit tamed yet. His hands went up to his bowed head, as if to cradle the injured nose, which was bleeding profusely, but Nigel sensed that Walt was looking through his fingers, measuring the distance. So, when the hands came down and Walt kicked viciously at his groin, Nigel was already moving back and to his left. Seizing Walt's boot, he gave the foot a sharp upward twist, upending his opponent, the side of whose head struck the linoleum with a stunning thud. Nigel picked up the palette knife and sat down on a kitchen chair against the wall—the chair recently occupied by the undraped Louisa.

"This could go on forever," he observed amiably, as Walt Barn sat upright on the floor, his eyes not perfectly focused yet, and wiped the blood off his face with the back of his hand. "The irrepressible in pursuit of the impossible."

Walt looked comically puzzled. "Well, who'd have thought it?" he said. "But if you expect me to shake hands and say the better man won and all that Public School crap, you can—"

"Oh, come off it. There's only one thing I'd expect from you."

"Yes?" Walt dragged himself to his feet.

"A kick in the liver as soon as I turn my back. Or would you rather use this?" Nigel handed him the palette knife.

Walt stared at it for a moment, then threw it down on the table.

"I guess I'll keep that for my painting." He grinned at Nigel suddenly. "Proper dirty fighter, aren't you?"

"When encouraged."

"I'll have another go at you one day. Have to brush up my timing a bit first."

"Pugnacious bastard. In the meantime, why not go and have a talk with Rebecca?"

"Wedding ring and all?"

"That's your affair. Of course, if you don't love her—"

"Who the hell says I don't love her?" Walt belligerently inquired.

Inspector Wright gave the appearance of a man utterly exhausted. His eyes seemed to be looking out from the far end of deep caverns. He sat slumped in Clare's studio, the hands—usually so restless, miming his words —dangling flaccidly now from the chair arms Even Nigel's account of the set-to with Walter Barn that afternoon produced hardly a flicker of animation.

"Well, it doesn't sound as if young Walt was the murderer," offered Clare

"No," said Nigel. "He's a demon when he loses his temper; he boils over suddenly and silently, like milk in a pan—Welsh blood, perhaps. He'd never think up a deliberate thing like that: neat incisions with a razor."

"He was going to incise you with a palette knife, though," said Wright.

"He'd lost his temper. I provoked him."

"But he could have been provoked into losing his temper with Dr Piers. He finds Miss Loudron in a hysterical state after the scene with her father; it makes him see red—"

"No. That won't do. He hasn't got that kind of chivalry He'd just slap her on the bottom and say 'Cheer up, ducks, it'll all come out in the wash.' "

"You say that, when you saw him beating up the newspapermen?"

"Yes."

Wright sighed, reached out for his whisky, took a deep draught, and closed his eyes. "We're getting nowhere. Nowhere at all A lovely set of motives. Lots of lovely opportunity. Some cockeyed alibis But hardly one solid fact to build on. Even their lies—and they've told enough, between them—seem to cancel one another out."

Clare refilled his tumbler "I must say it does seem odd no one heard a splash. It was a dead quiet night; no traffic on the river, only one car—"

"*One* car?"

"The car in which the body was brought to the river. There are only three roads, at all near, which run right down to within a few yards of the water. And there are houses at the end of each of them," said Clare. "It's a hundred to one that the murderer would use a car and would choose one of those three roads. In that fog, you can't imagine him going further afield."

"But the Loudron cars have been checked and double-checked. We took samples of dust. We went over the mats and upholstery with—"

"Dr. Piers' car included?"

"Of course. A hair or two of his on the floor by the front passenger's seat—"

"The *passenger's* seat?"

"Yes. It seems Graham Loudron often acted as his chauffeur."

Nigel, pacing up and down the studio, paused. He gave the Inspector a veiled look. "I think Clare's right. Somebody must have heard a splash. Somebody in the Trafalgar Tavern."

"But we inquired of every resident there Those likeliest to hear anything —in the apartment nearest the river wall—had the radio on."

"Too bad," remarked Nigel dreamily. "Nevertheless I think I shall work on the assumption—the far from tacit assumption—that they did hear a splash. About eleven. We've got to get this log jam shifted."

Wright, looking a little revived, winked at Clare "What's the old man cooking up?"

"Something nasty, I'll be bound. 'Eels boiled in broo, Mither.' "

" 'Mak' my bed soon,' " Nigel capped the quotation. "But that's not it . . . An association . . . What did he call that dirty girl? 'Lousy.' No. Ah! 'Cleopatra.' A barge " He swung round on Wright. "The barge! Harold's old wreck. What fools we are! That'd be the place to hide the diary. Why didn't we—"

"Speak for yourself, chum. I had two men taking that barge to pieces all yesterday afternoon."

"Oh, you did, did you?" Nigel looked only momentarily disconcerted. "Nobody ever tells me anything."

"It's full of mud and rats and rotting timber. Nothing else. And I wish you'd get your mind off that diary. If it was the least danger to him, the murderer would have set a match to it long ago."

"We mustn't assume that it was the murderer who tore out those pages "

The three sat in silence for some moments—a silence broken at last by

Clare's high, light voice, whose childlike timbre often deceived the ignorant into imagining it went with a childish mind "A phrase keeps running in my head: 'He's got it taped, he's got it taped.' Now what do you suppose that can mean?"

Nigel seldom made the error of not taking seriously Clare's random contributions to a subject. " 'Taped'? Let's see Measurements Boxer's knuckles. Ticker tape. Tape recording. Name tapes in schoolboy's underwear." His mouth fell open. "No! *Tape recording!* That's how Harold could have got his alibi. Don't you see? He sets a tape recorder going near his telephone in the hall, just in case someone should ring up or ring the doorbell while he is out. Dashes off to Croom's Hill. Kills his father. On his return, plays the tape over to himself. Hears the telephone bell ringing on it. It'd be easy to fix exactly the time at which the bell had rung—so many minutes after he'd switched the machine on and left the house Wait a minute, though How long does a spool of that stuff play for?"

"Half an hour," answered Wright, poker-faced.

"Are you sure?"

"I ought to be. I had a chap spending the best part of a day playing Harold Loudron's spools over."

Nigel bowed his head. Clare smiled at Wright.

"Dearest Inspector, you know I love you fondly. But sometimes you are the most provoking creature in the world."

"Of course, he could have destroyed that particular spool," said Nigel. "Or just scrubbed it."

"Oh, yes, indeed he could. But we're back where we started. By the way, I've been onto the chap who put that trunk call through to Harold's house —just in case Harold might have *asked* him to put it through at that time, so as to provide an alibi. He says Harold did not ask him. Respectable chap. No reason to suspect him of lying about it."

Nigel took up one of Clare's chisels and sighted along it "If our bird sits tight, you're going to have an unsolved case. I think it's time I put a cat among the pigeons."

But a very different sort of cat was already on the prowl. While Clare, Nigel, and Inspector Wright were talking, the telephone bell rang in Harold Loudron's house. Harold was out, dining with a business associate. Sharon took up the receiver. "Who? Oh," she said "I didn't expect—"

"Listen. I've got to see you—"

"But—"

"The police have been at me again. And I've got to have another session

after dinner. Don't know how long it'll go on. It should be safe about 11·30. Slip out then. I'll be waiting at the end of Lassell Street."

"But why not here? Why out?"

"I'll explain when I see you."

"Well, can't you give me some—"

"It's not advisable on the telephone. I can only tell you we've got to have a talk. Terribly urgent."

"Oh, very well."

"And keep this to yourself, my dear. Tell nobody. Repeat, nobody. 'By."

At 11:30, Sharon came out of her house. She was fully dressed, and wore a thick frieze coat and a headscarf. The east wind had died down, but the air was biting; Sharon shivered, feeling the cold at once, and a certain chill of apprehension, too, but it was partly excitement that made her shiver, Nigel had been right when he told her she would do anything for a kick.

Quietly she opened the door in the wall. She looked left, and then right. The street lamp outside the "Cutty Sark" tavern threw an amber glow over Ballast Quay. She could hear water slapping the river wall; no other sound.

The windows of the "Cutty Sark" and the houses on either side of it showed no glimmer of light. It was a dark night, but Sharon could just pick out against the sky the pyramid of scrap iron overtopping the corrugated-iron wall of the yard beyond the curving quay.

"Why did we ever come to live in this Godforsaken hole?" she muttered peevishly as she hurried in her heelless shoes over the cobbles past the public house, startling a cat, which streaked away from her like a ripple of shadow.

At the corner, she descried a figure standing in the shadow of the scrap-yard wall. Was it the person she expected? The figure raised a finger to its lips. The finger looked unnaturally thick, which Sharon put down as a trick of light and shadow, being unable to see till she got close that the hand was wearing a heavy gauntlet glove.

"Why all this mystery?" she murmured, looking up into a familiar face that seemed the face of a stranger.

"Shh! I may have been followed. Come this way a little Daren't go into the house."

Sharon could barely hear the whisper. She shivered again, but allowed herself to be drawn by the arm, which was firmly tucked into her own, toward the entrance of the narrow alley between the scrapyard and the quay where the scrap was loaded onto ships. To her right, a crane stood up

11. *A SILK STOCKING*

Standing just inside the breaker's yard, Nigel Strangeways cast his eye over the dismal scene A thin, bitter rain was falling—raindrops black with smut from the power-station chimneys Mounds and pyramids of scrap iron towered above him, the rusting detritus of a civilization: boilers, bicycles, oxygen cylinders, coils of barbed wire, oil drums, perambulators, automobile engines, cisterns, cogwheels, pipes, pots and kettles, machinery, all tossed and jumbled together as if by a whirlwind The oxyacetylene burners, with which the larger objects in this tangle were broken up, stayed silent today, the first arrivals at the yard had found a body there, and soon the police were in occupation, photographing, measuring, poking about for clues in the jungle of metal upon which Nigel's eyes now dully rested. At last he forced them to look down at the last piece of scrap to have been deposited here. It was covered with tarpaulin. Chief Inspector Wright, his sergeant, and the yard foreman stood beside it. Wright, Nigel noticed, was gesturing forcibly; he seemed to have a new lease on life. Last night he had complained of the dearth of material facts; well, now he'd got one—and good luck to him.

Nigel walked over and pulled back the tarpaulin. His eye traveled up from the slender feet, one of them shoeless, along the sodden frieze coat, to the neck. A silk stocking was round it, knotted presumably at the back. He had expected Sharon's face to be an atrocious sight, and it was. Her eyes stared back into his with the merciless indifference of the dead. Sharon had not been any great credit to society; smart clothes, smarty talk, selfishness, an appetite for the basic thrills, but this was no comfort to Nigel, who feared he had been indirectly responsible for her death. He pulled back the tarpaulin over the staring eyes and the pretty, snarling teeth. It was 8·45. Half an hour ago, Wright's telephone call had dragged him out of bed

Wright gave Nigel a look both sympathetic and bracing; "Yes, I understand," it said, "but this is no time for brooding." He drew his friend aside and leaned against a rusting water tank, from which he surveyed his men at work while he talked rapidly to Nigel.

"They found her at eight o'clock Been dead seven to ten hours, the quack says. Autopsy'll tell us nearer Strangled—you saw that, probably in the alleyway outside; signs of a scuffle and of her being dragged in here, one

While this farce was being enacted, the murderer slid open a door in the corrugated-iron wall, deposited the victim—now at last dead—amongst the scrap, and walked decorously away in the direction from which the seaman had come.

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shoe found just inside the yard. Face dirty and bruised; must have been thrown face downward and strangled from behind. Not nice at all. No signs of sexual assault or robbery; left her handbag and purse at home. Sergeant Reed has broken it to her husband. Harold's in a bad way; Dr. James is with him just now and will take him to Croom's Hill. Harold says he dined out with a business associate, returning home about midnight; didn't want to disturb his wife—they sleep in separate rooms—so went straight to bed Reed and Dr. James say they found no scratches or bruises on him. Yes, Simpson?"

A plain-clothes man had hurried up to report. Several people living in the houses on Ballast Quay had just told him about the episode of the drunken sailor; it was the only disturbance during the night so far reported. Simpson pointed in the direction where the Dutch ship lay.

"Well, stop her, man," exclaimed Wright. "What are you wasting time here for?"

"It's all under control, sir. Lewis has gone aboard. He'll hold the ship."

Wright nodded at the man, smiling faintly. "Some of these chaps can actually think for themselves," he said to Nigel. "Would you believe it? All right, I'll interview him straight away."

After giving the sergeant some instructions, Wright untied the silk stocking from Sharon's neck and handed it to him. As they walked along to Lovell's Quay, he remarked, "Reed may find that one stocking of a pair is missing—amongst the dead woman's or Miss Loudron's. But if the murderer has any sense, he'll have destroyed the other one."

In a couple of minutes they were aboard the Dutch motor vessel. It was one of the ships largely manned by members of single families, who are enabled to purchase them by government grants, paid back in instalments, and who use them as floating homes. The master received them in his cabin. It was spruce and shining, meticulously tidy, a genuine Dutch interior, with potted plants on a table and bright curtains over the window; it smelt of coffee, cigars, and furniture polish. The master's buxom wife was placidly knitting, while two stolid children finished their enormous breakfast. The master himself could speak only a few words of English, but a younger brother, the mate, was reasonably fluent After the usual introductions and civilities, the master's wife removed her children, and Jan, the drunken seaman of last night—a nephew of hers—was summoned. He turned out to be a strapping, gawky young man, suffering from a hang-over but not, as far as Wright could judge, a bad conscience as well.

The mate interpreting, Jan gave what account he could of the previous night. He remembered the last house he had visited, and this could be

checked, but he had only vague recollections of his movements thereafter. Wright had to phrase his questions tactfully, for there was a strong atmosphere of family solidarity in the cabin. Jan had certainly met no women on his way back to the ship; never, he soberly averred, did he mix women and drink; one or the other, yes, but not both at the same time. He remembered falling flat on his face over a chain, which accounted for the bruise on his forehead, and then falling into the Thames. There were abrasions on the palms of his hands, caused by the first fall, but no scratches on the backs of them or on his wrists, such as a woman would have made in fighting to tear loose the hands tightening a knot at the back of her neck.

And as he came along the narrow alley through the scrapyard, just before he fell over the chain, had he seen or heard anything unusual?

No.

"Anything at all?" put in Nigel, knowing the literal-mindedness of the Dutch.

"There was a couple. In the alley. Lovers. It was very dark. I nearly ran into them," said Jan through the interpreter.

Asked if he could describe them, Jan blushed and stammered out a few phrases.

"He says he did not like to look close. He is not a—what is your phrase?"

"Not a Peeping Tom?" Nigel offered.

"Yes. Just so."

"Tell him it may be most important to remember anything—any impression he got about this couple," said Wright urgently.

The reply came. "My nephew says the man's back was toward him. He was about middle height. He seemed to be holding the woman up. My nephew thought she was perhaps drunk."

"Tell him we're most grateful for—"

"Just a minute," Nigel interjected. "Is he certain that the person holding up this woman against the wall was a man?"

The question evidently shocked Jan. He blushed up to the roots of his blond hair.

"He says, but it must have been a man They were in the embrace of lovers."

"But it was dark. He couldn't swear on his oath that it was not a woman dressed as a man."

Jan replied that he could not absolutely swear to it, but he was certain in his own mind.

With the master's permission, Wright now got Jan to remove his trousers. A woman being strangled from behind would kick backward. There

was an abrasion on one knee and a bruise beside the other. But when Wright got Jan to fetch the trousers he had been wearing the previous night, a tear and some dirt on them corresponded exactly with the marks on his legs, Sharon's heelless shoes could not have made the tear.

"Elimination," remarked Wright as they went ashore, "is the thief of time."

"You're satisfied about Jan?"

"Oh, yes But I've left Reed to go through the women's stockings on board. Never know what the A.C. won't ask you if you've left undone."

"And now what?"

"Question the Loudrons. Find out where they all were last night."

"You think this must be linked up with Dr. Piers' death?"

"I'll take a bet on it. No robbery No sexual interference."

They walked on in silence for half a minute.

"But *why?*" asked Nigel. "To stop her mouth? I was sure she'd finally told me all she knew about the night he died. And the Loudrons knew—or at least must have assumed—that she'd done so. Why silence her *after* she'd told all?"

"Two possible reasons," Wright briskly replied. "She didn't tell you all, she may have had some piece of knowledge whose significance she didn't realize. Or—"

"Don't say it That's what's on my mind. Or she may have been killed *because* she'd told me too much. Killed out of sheer spite."

"Ye-es. But that doesn't quite fit in with the murderer's actions up to date—the cold-blooded, planned murder of Dr. Piers, and then the sitting tight and letting us make the running."

They were at the entrance of the corrugated-iron passage. A police car waited in Lassell Street, on their left. When they had got in, Nigel said, "Why was it so dark in the alley last night? Doesn't it have a street lamp? Or was it the effect of liquor on Jan's eyes?"

"There's one of those concrete lamp standards at either end of the alley Both the globes are smashed. Presumably by X. The lights were on all right when the 'Cutty Sark' closed."

"That proves it was a premeditated crime. I wonder how X got her out of the house into the alley?"

"Assignation by telephone? Anyway, it must have been somebody she knew well—and trusted."

When the car got to 6 Croom's Hill, Nigel surprised his friend by saying he would go home; he wanted his breakfast, and he needed to think—a process he refused to initiate on an empty stomach.

"You can tell me later all about the Loudrons' alibis and which of them you have arrested," said Nigel. "I leave the interviewing to you with perfect confidence."

"Very kind of you to say so, I'm sure," replied Wright, equally sardonic

Half an hour later, Nigel pushed aside his empty plate and took a fourth cup of coffee. Clare, who had been reading the paper while he ate in gloomy silence, looked up at him.

"You feel bad about this."

"Yes."

"But you couldn't have prevented it. Or could you?" Clare added.

"I wish I knew."

"You liked Sharon?"

"In a way. She made several attempts to get me into bed with her, and it's difficult to dislike an attractive woman, I find, who does that"

"Did she succeed?" Clare equably inquired.

"As it happens, no."

"You didn't like her enough for that?"

"I suppose not. Anyway, she would keep asking me at such inconvenient times."

Clare went off into one of her rare gales of laughter. When it had subsided, Nigel said, "I'm obsessed with the silk-stocking motif. Poor Sharon got hers wetted that night by the waste pipe of Dr. Piers' bathroom, then she was strangled with one. Is it just a coincidence?"

"Justice sometimes works through coincidences, they say. Poetic justice."

Nigel gazed dimly at her. Then gradually his face lighted up. "Poetic justice? I wonder. I think you've hit something," he muttered. "Yes, it could make sense. Now I must go upstairs and think"

He thought all that morning, and by lunchtime a pattern had formed in his mind—an almost complete pattern, but there was one piece missing; a keypiece, it might well be, without which the pattern must remain no more than a plausible construction of the mind. Someone had said something that would give him this piece and lock the whole business together; he had a dim idea that the secret he sought lay in the intonation rather than the actual words.

Putting on his macintosh, Nigel went out into the rain. A lorry ground up the hill; written on its side was the legend "PROCESSORS OF BUTCHERS' WASTE." He crossed into the Park and began walking rapidly, past Wolfe's house, across the football ground, through the flower garden, with its brooding cedars, and down the path running parallel with Mays Hill. He walked twice round the periphery of the Park, uphill and downhill, reviewing in his

mind the conversations he had had with each person concerned in the case, while the cold rain beat down on him.

On his third circuit he varied the route, walking to the pond and pausing between the water and the magnolia and camellia trees to gaze at the ducks. "No, it's not here," he heard himself glumly muttering to a mallard, as if it had failed him. He moved on, but ten paces further stopped dead. A slow burn. He had got it after all, though the formula had not been quite word-perfect.

Nigel strode home, took off his clothes, and went to sleep, body and mind exhausted.

At nine o'clock Wright turned up. He tossed a bulky sheaf of typescript at Nigel, who ran his eye rapidly over the pages while Clare cooked a ham omelet with chipped potatoes and the Inspector ate it Nigel had something of the late T. E. Lawrence's capacity for getting the meat out of a book at phenomenal speed. The verbatim interviews with the suspects, which Wright had given him, ran to a large number of typescript sheets, but he had mastered the gist of them by the time the Inspector finished his second cup of strong coffee.

"Well, how does it strike you?" the latter asked.

"Peculiar about these alibis Four out of five very much the same as for the night of Dr. Piers' death."

"Yes."

"So Walter Barn did take my advice."

According to the evidence they had given Wright, Walt had cycled down to 6 Croom's Hill after supper, and been with Rebecca in her room till shortly after eleven. This time, they did not play gramophone records all the evening; they had a heart-to-heart talk, which apparently brought them to a satisfactory conclusion about their future. James Loudron had met Walt in the hall when he arrived, and had heard Rebecca saying good-by to him at the front door when he left, but there was no corroborating evidence that Walt and Rebecca had remained in her room over this period of two and a half hours.

"However," said Wright as they discussed it, "the crucial time is after 10 30, when the 'Cutty Sark' closed, probably a bit later. We've got a witness along there who heard a smashing of glass—thought it was local hooligans—around 11:15."

"X putting out the street lamps at either end of the alleyway? Incidentally, how did he do this? Swarm up the concrete standards with a hammer?"

"No. The padlock of the door into the breaker's yard was forced during

the night. I take it X did this first, then pinched a long metal scaffolding pole—there are dozens lying about in the yard—to reach up with and smash the globes."

"Walt Barn would have had about ten minutes to get there and do this, after leaving Croom's Hill. Not enough, surely?"

"Not on foot, perhaps. But he had a bicycle, remember"

"So has Rebecca."

"Oh, Nigel, surely you can't suspect her?" said Clare. "Not this time."

"Why not?"

"If she or Walt killed Sharon, and did it after 11:15, surely they'd have given each other an alibi for a longer period than they have."

"That's a good point, of course," said Wright. "But the trouble is, we've no outside evidence yet that Miss Loudron went straight to bed, as she claims, after Barn left, or that Barn cycled straight home; no one at his own house heard him come in."

"What about Graham Loudron?" Clare asked.

Graham's story was that, after dining with James and Rebecca, he had gone up to his room, read a book, listened to the radio, and turned in at eleven.

"Short and simple," Nigel commented. "Like last time. Except that Sharon was not keeping him company."

Clare shivered and looked distressed. She had never quite got used to Nigel's occasional brutality of statement, even though she knew it to be a sign of anger, not of insensibility.

"You questioned him about the book and the radio program?" asked Nigel.

"Of course. He had no difficulty with that. Why should he? The murderer didn't have to start work till after eleven. If Graham is our man, we'll turn up sooner or later somebody who saw him leave the house, front door or back, or going along toward the scene of the crime. But the telephone call seems to clear him."

"Will someone please enlighten me?" said Clare.

"Not a confinement this time. Dr. James says he received an emergency call at 11:10, just as he was about to go up to bed. Caller—muffled voice and all, James did not recognize it—said his mother had had a fit and their own doctor was out. Gave an address in East Greenwich. Said the street was between the Woolwich Road and the river. Rang off. James got out his car and in five minutes had reached the district indicated. Swanned around looking for this street. Found it. But there was no house of the number given him by the caller. Walked up and down the length of the street to

make sure. Assumed it was a hoax. Turned round and drove home. Got back at 11·40 So, if what our Dutch friend saw just after 11:30 was the murderer and his victim, Dr. James was at least near the scene of the crime at the crucial period. He could have smashed the lamps at 11:15 on his way to a mythical call, shown himself walking up and down the street in question, returned to the alleyway—"

"But I don't see how this clears Graham," Clare put in.

"He heard the doctor going out in his car. That was a little after 11:10. Therefore he could not have smashed the lamps at 11:15."

"But he could have heard this morning that his brother had gone out," Clare protested.

"No. Dr. James told me he'd not mentioned the call to anyone at home before we started interviewing them."

"It clears Graham, all right," said Nigel slowly, "unless it was he who made the call."

"Exactly Let's forget the remote possibility that it was a hoax by an outsider. Either Dr. James pretended he had received the call—no one in the house heard the telephone go, but it's in the study, and they wouldn't hear it upstairs—as a pretext for taking his car out and driving to East Greenwich, or it was X, ringing from a public call box."

"X being Graham or Walter?"

"Or Harold Loudron; we'll come to him in a moment. X would make a bogus call to implicate James. If, in fact, there was no call, James is lying and he must be the murderer."

"It'd be a pretty stupid alibi to fake—saying he'd had a call that took him so near the scene of his crime," said Nigel.

"Yes. But there's the matter of his gauntlet gloves. Since these depositions were taken, we found them stuffed away in a locked cupboard in the surgery. They have scratches on their backs—the sort of marks that could have been made by a woman's nails clawing at the wearer's hands Fresh scratches."

"What does James say about this?"

"He says they were not on the hall table, where he usually keeps them, when he went out last night Professed himself baffled as to how they could have got into the surgery cupboard. Wasn't sure when he'd used or noticed them last; a couple of days ago, he thought."

"So either he's lying again or it was another move in a plan to frame him for the murder."

"If he killed Sharon, surely he'd have thrown the gloves into the river?" said Clare. "It'd be asking for trouble to hide them in his own surgery."

"Yes. But murderers do the most God-damn silly things"

"So that leaves us with Harold."

Harold Loudron's evidence was somewhat incoherent. Wright had found him prostrate with shock and grief (or was it remorse?) for the death of his wife, and had not pressed him hard. Harold had met his business associate at the Savoy for dinner, leaving the restaurant at 10:45 P.M. So much the friend had confirmed.

"But I thought he'd previously told Sergeant Reed he didn't get home till midnight?" said Nigel sharply. "It'd only take twenty to thirty minutes to cover the distance at night."

"Just so. I taxed him with this. He said he'd drunk too much at dinner, and realizing soon after he started home that he wasn't in a fit condition to drive, he parked the car in a side street and waited till he'd sobered up a bit."

"What street?"

"He doesn't know. Thinks it was a turning off Tooley Street It's an ingeniously simple fabrication, if it isn't true."

"He could easily have pinched his brother's gauntlet gloves But how the devil would he contrive to get his wife out of the house at that time of night?" said Nigel, after a short silence "I can't see her agreeing to take a romantic stroll with him through the scrapyard. But you're looking very sphinxlike; was it one of her own stockings that Sharon was strangled with?"

"No. It was one of Rebecca's," Wright replied.

"Rebecca's?" Clare gaped at him.

"To be precise, one of her mother's She's got drawers stuffed with her mother's things. I thought this was rather an old-fashioned stocking—heavy silk, not nylon. We found the other one of the pair in a drawer, together with several rolled-up pairs."

"And how did Rebecca react to this discovery of yours?"

"Well, she panicked a bit First said she didn't know a stocking was missing; then changed her tune and said oh, yes, she remembered now, she'd torn it accidentally some years ago, while wearing it, and had thrown it away."

"Not what one would expect her to do with a sacred relic," said Nigel.

"No. But I'm not convinced she was lying when she said she didn't know one of the pair was missing."

"But she knew, before you interviewed her, that Sharon had been strangled with a silk stocking?"

"Yes Dr. James blurted that out in the family circle as soon as I telephoned him, though I'd particularly requested him not to."

"Your X, whoever he is, seems to be flinging suspicion around rather indiscriminately," said Clare. "Isn't it odd that he should try to incriminate James *and* Rebecca?"

"Yes. Which inclines me to think he is one or the other of them."

"How did those two react during the interviews?" asked Nigel.

"Pity you weren't there," said Wright crisply. "Miss Loudron, as I told you, seemed panicky Her brother looked as if he'd been hit with a mallet. I'd say they were both less upset by Sharon's death than by its effect on Harold. It's only my guess, but I had a feeling they were concealing another kind of anxiety about him."

"That Harold might have killed Sharon?"

"Yes. And I suppose he had a strongish motive. He's an uxorious type, and she'd been unfaithful to him with Graham If James or Rebecca is not the murderer, no doubt it was their fears for Harold that made them sell me the Dutch seaman so vigorously."

Clare started up in her chair. "But how did they know about the seaman?"

"Graham told them; no, you mustn't draw the wrong inference. He accompanied James when his brother went to fetch Harold this morning; that was early, just after I'd telephoned James to break the news to him. It seems that, while James was giving Harold a sedative and so on, Graham thought he'd do a little private detection. He got into conversation with a group of women on Ballast Quay, they were all standing at their doors by then, drinking in the delicious sensation of having a murdered woman's body so near their homes. They told him about Jan's escapade"

"But he didn't pass the information on to you, I notice," said Nigel, tapping the sheaf of transcripts

"No Claimed he'd been too busy over Harold, and so forth. He's an unco-operative type, though."

Nigel gazed ruminatively down his nose "You've said it Yet he suddenly becomes madly co-operative, volunteers to accompany James to Harold's house. That's not at all in character, is it?"

"Morbid curiosity, maybe—going to the scene of the crime."

"Or returning to it," said Nigel

There was a silence Then Nigel said, "Sharon told me she was afraid what 'they' might do if they discovered she'd talked about Graham's drug racket. We've got to bear that in mind as a possible reason for the crime.

Who are They, anyway, apart from Abdul, who's presumably on the high seas?"

"The Narcotics chums haven't been able to unearth any widespread racket here. They're inclined to think now that it's only been a matter of a small parcel conveyed to Graham Loudron and distributed by him to a few favored acquaintances."

"Perhaps that's why Graham didn't try very hard to conceal from me that he'd done a bit of drug-passing. Still, if he did have other associates—"

"They'd not go to those lengths," said Wright dogmatically. "Carve her up a bit, maybe But not kill her. Take it from me; I know that sort of criminal."

"I believe you. But it's a tempting idea—one of Graham's associates killing the poor girl while Graham himself sits tight at home diverting suspicion onto Rebecca and James."

Clare's beautiful eyes looked troubled. "It's confusing to have *two* morally irresponsible people concerned in the case."

"The other being Walter Barn?" said Wright.

"Yes. I feel that both he and Graham are capable of telling elaborate lies, of doing things like hiding James' gauntlets—of making away with Dr. Piers' diary, even—out of sheer impish cussedness They've not started to grow up, morally. They'd enjoy confusing the issues, Graham particularly would relish leading Nigel up the garden path; he had it in for Nigel from the start."

"You may be right," commented the Inspector, but without much conviction.

"Aren't you too readily inclined, in criminal cases, to assume there are only two motives for witnesses lying: either to conceal their own connection with the crime or to protect someone else? What about the person who can't resist a piece of mischief? The grown-up child who throws a spanner in the works just to see what will happen?"

12. *THE HIGH OLD ROMAN WAY*

Clare's theorizing was to be tested sooner than any of them would have predicted. Wright had been gone only half an hour, and Nigel and Clare were reading books, their chairs drawn close to the cozy-stove, when the doorbell rang Graham Loudron was standing outside.

"Well, this is a surprise," said Clare, in markedly neutral tones, when Nigel brought him in.

"I do hope I'm not disturbing you, Miss Massinger? I imagined you wouldn't be working as late as this."

Graham's suave address and *jeune-premier* appearance made it sound, to Nigel, like the opening lines of a third-rate West End comedy. I am the elderly husband, solid but dull, whom the dashing and specious young man intends to supplant in his wife's affections. By the end of Act I, he seems likely to succeed. The wife is flattered; her maternal feeling for the young man is being diverted into a more questionable channel. But in Act II, our deb daughter appears. And so forth, and so forth.

"I really came to see your—to have a talk with Strangeways," Graham was saying.

"Talk away," said Clare crisply.

Oh, dear, thought Nigel, the dialogue's going wrong already.

"Get him a drink, darling," Clare added.

Aha, she's pretending indifference—dislike, even—to throw dust in the husband's eyes, we must be in Scene 2 of Act I. "What would you like? Whisky? Armagnac?" Or is it a thriller, not a comedy? A hand comes out from a secret panel while the husband's back is turned, shakes a powder into the young man's glass He dies, downstage right. The husband is suspected. But the poisoner turns out to be their faithful old housekeeper, whose daughter has been seduced by the young man.

"This is ghastly about Sharon," said the young man, cradling his glass of armagnac in both palms.

"You were fond of her?" asked Clare.

Graham's eyes were fastened upon hers. With an air of rueful candor, he said, "I don't know about fond We'd been lovers. Once. But you know about that, don't you? . . . She had such vitality. I can't believe—somehow I feel responsible for it."

"For her death? Why?" Nigel tried to make his tone sympathetic. If Graham was going to un-clam, he must not be discouraged.

The small, prehensile mouth moved, as if to get a grip on some tenable form of words. "I don't know. It's just a feeling. If I hadn't started it—"

"You mean a general feeling of guilt?" Clare put in.

Graham mumbled something incoherent.

"Or are you worried that Harold punished her for her infidelity?" Clare went on, regardless of a warning glance from Nigel, who thought she was making the pace too hot.

"Oh, not Harold, surely," said Graham, a shade overstrenuously. "After all, it wasn't the first time she'd— But anyway, isn't that Dutch seaman the likeliest person?"

"Sharon was neither robbed nor raped. We don't even know that she was killed at the time when he came along, it may have been later Or, again, he may have seen the murder."

"Seen it?" Graham looked horrified

Nigel told him about the couple, apparently lovers, whom Jan had passed in the alleyway. "Jan may be useful to the police. He might be able to identify the person he saw."

"Oh." Graham seemed temporarily silenced by this thought. "But it was very dark, wasn't it?" he resumed. "And the chap was blind drunk. He walked straight into the river. Or so some people living there told me."

"That's true. But a man can sometimes recall something, in a vivid flash, out of his drunk period. Something he didn't consciously take in at the time."

"That's assuming the couple he saw were Sharon and—"

"Yes. We have no evidence for it Yet Would you like some more armagnac?"

"Thank you." Graham held out his glass with a steady hand. "I need this To give me courage for a confession."

Nigel and Clare withheld comment.

"Tell me"—Graham gave them his rare smile, which had considerable charm—"tell me first, are you pretty sure that Sharon's death is linked up with my father's?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Very well. Then you'd better read this."

Graham stood up and, leaning against the mantelshelf, took a folded piece of paper from his wallet and handed it to Nigel. Nigel opened it. There were seven lines of manuscript writing, the beginning of the top line charred away; the script was either Dr. Piers' or an excellent forgery.

> . . . stall him. If I died before he could kill me—why didn't that occur to me?—it would solve the whole problem. Justice would be done without making him a murderer The high old Roman way out of trouble. Fall on one's sword, only I haven't got a sword, and if I had I'm so light I should probably bounce off the point Petronius, then. The hedonist's method. Euthanasia Yes, that's the answer.

"Where did you find this?" asked Nigel, passing the charred paper to Clare.

"In the surgery. There were several pages of an old casebook; my father had started writing his diary in it."

"When did you find it?"

"The morning he disappeared."

"You found the book, or just this fragment?"

"Oh, the book."

"You were looking for it, then?"

"Of course I was looking for it," Graham answered, a little feverishly. "He'd talked about a diary the night you came to dinner. And when he disappeared, I thought the diary might tell us why. So I worked out in my mind where the diary could be. Pinched the key of the cupboard, and found the casebook."

"You looked through them all till you came to this one?"

"Oh, no," replied Graham, with a veiled look, "I had a pretty good idea which year to turn up."

"Then you tore out the pages and burned them, all but this piece?"

"Not immediately I kept them hidden for a while. Then my father's body was found, and I knew the police would be turning on the heat. So I burned the rest."

"Why only the rest?"

Graham looked rueful again. "I meant first to burn them all. I put a match to the last sheet. But I suddenly realized how important these lines at the bottom were, so I beat out the flame just as it reached them "

There was a long stretch of silence. Graham sat down and took a gulp at his armagnac. He was trembling a little now, as if from a release of tension

"I see," said Nigel at last, unable to postpone any longer the crucial question. If Graham answered it wrong, the answer would all but convict him of murder. "And who do you suppose is the 'he' your father is writing about? Dr. James?"

"James? Good Lord, no. It's me."

Graham had not answered wrong.

". . . 'stall him'—I suppose that word was 'forestall.' You seriously mean

to tell us that what your father is saying here is that he's going to commit suicide in order to prevent you killing him first? It takes a bit of swallowing."

"I know. I wouldn't believe it myself, if it wasn't written down there in black and white."

"So you had intended to kill him, and he knew it?"

"I'd better tell you the whole story."

It was not until he had met Nellie, two months before, said Graham, that he had connected Dr. Piers with his mother. When Nellie told him about the letters which Millie had sent, *in extremis,* to the father of her child, Graham had suddenly wondered if these might not be the letters that he had overheard James and Rebecca discussing—the cause of the dreadful estrangement between their parents. He had, of course, wondered about his own parentage often enough before this; but now everything fitted into place—Dr. Piers' seeking him out seven years ago, taking him into his home, adopting him, and treating his subsequent misdemeanors with such leniency—all this would carry sense as the old doctor's attempt to make restitution for what he had done to Millie.

This, Graham explained, was why he had gone straight to the casebook for 1940—the year in which, if he himself was indeed the fruit of their love, the love affair between Millie and Dr. Piers had taken place. His father had a vein of sentiment beneath his sophisticated surface, and would be likely to choose the book of that year for his confession.

After Nellie first gave him the clue, Graham had made inquiries among those who had been hers and Millie's neighbors in East Greenwich during the 1939–1940 period He had finally found a woman who, plied with drink in a local pub, refreshed her memory to the extent of recalling that Millie had been a patient of Dr. Piers and that she (the narrator) had suspected there was something between them when, one day, she saw Dr. Piers calling the girl into his consulting room The pair must have been remarkably discreet, for the woman admitted she had heard no gossip about them at the time or later.

With this knowledge, said Graham, he confronted his father It had happened a day or two before Nigel and Clare went to dinner there. Dr. Piers had not attempted to deny Graham's charges, nor did Graham now attempt to deny that he had threatened his father's life. The rest of the diary pages—the material he had destroyed—gave an account of this interview and of Dr. Piers' love affair with Millie.

Nigel questioned the young man closely about the interview, getting the

impression that he was holding nothing back and not minimizing the hostile attitude he had taken up.

"I must ask you this," he said. "Did you really intend to kill your father, or were they empty threats—just to frighten and punish him."

Graham considered it seriously. "No, I meant to. I'd hated my father for years, long before I knew who he was."

"But when you found out it was Dr. Piers, who'd been good to you, who'd done everything he could to make up to you for what you'd gone through—"

"It's not what *I*'d gone through," Graham interrupted, with a chill, restrained violence. "Not that I could forget that, mind you. But I couldn't forgive him for letting my mother down."

"Yet you knew it wasn't his fault He never saw those letters your mother sent him till it was too late; his wife had intercepted them "

"Now you're preaching at me again," said Graham, his old Adam returning. "I can't stick sermonizing. I had enough of that from the swine I was sent to when mother died; preaching and beating—I got the whole works, day after day, and on an empty stomach." His voice had gone shrill, a self-pitying whine in it. "You people who've had it soft all your lives can't begin to understand—"

"Now *you*'re preaching," said Clare gently.

Graham gave her his deferential smile—a smile she felt he must have cultivated during the years of inhuman treatment, so artificially ingratiating did it look, a mere baring of the teeth.

"You were going to speak about your mother," Nigel prompted

"You think I should have forgotten about her after all this time? No use crying over spilled milk?"

"I think nothing of the sort."

A strange expression came over the fruit-bat face. "I was only a kid when she died But I'll never forget her misery during those last weeks, and how she tried to hide it from me. I'd seen her turning away to cough into a handkerchief. She spat blood. She was so weak she could hardly get out of bed in the morning or stand up at the stove It got so she couldn't have men any longer And that meant we'd no money except the little she'd saved for a rainy day. Rainy day! It was a bloody deluge. She used to give me nearly all the food she bought—said she didn't feel hungry. I don't know how she could cough up so much blood and stay alive. I loved her, you see I've never been able to love anyone since. How the hell could anyone expect me not to hate my father, who'd let all this happen?" The words came oozing out of him, like matter from a septic wound. "We had a music box. About

all we did have left. We used to play it to each other when she'd put me to bed—before she went out onto the streets and brought a man back home. She loved that music box; maybe *he* had given it to her. But she had to pop it in the end. She cried a lot. I *hated* her crying."

Graham Loudron stopped abruptly, staring into the past, his eyes dry, his face hard as concrete.

"I see you had very strong reasons for hating your father," said Nigel, after a pause. "You threatened to kill him. Why didn't you?"

Graham looked up, startled. "He did it for me. I don't think I'd have gone through with it, anyway."

"Why did you destroy the rest of the diary, then?"

"That's obvious, isn't it? When his body was found and everyone said he'd been murdered, I had to destroy the pages that gave away the motive I had for killing him, and the fact that I'd threatened to."

"But you kept this bit, as a sort of insurance policy? You knew what Petronius did?"

"I looked it up. Severed his arteries in a hot bath. You said it'd be impossible; the cuts could not have been equally deep. Well, if Petronius could do it, my father could."

"Petronius had a slave to do it for him, I think. Anyway, you believed this extract from his diary was proof of suicide. Why did you conceal it from us all till now?"

A sort of old lag's smirk appeared on Graham's face, and at once vanished; "Don't know nothing about that," he might have been on the point of saying. He said, "I wasn't brought up to go rushing off and Assisting the Authorities. Far otherwise I just wanted to keep out of trouble, the police would ask what I'd been up to, pinching the diary And so on"

"And you liked the idea of stringing them along?" said Clare.

"Something of that, I'll admit."

"In that case, why produce it now?" asked Nigel, in a neutral voice. "Because you thought you're likely to be charged with the murder?"

"I never touched Sharon I was here all last night."

"I'm talking about Dr. Piers' death That's the only one the diary is relevant to. Why produce this fragment *now?*"

Graham's eyes were fastened, limpetlike, upon Nigel's.

"You told me Sharon's death is linked up with my father's," he said. "That means one of us, one of the family, killed her. Right?"

"Right."

"Which means either that my father's death was not suicide—someone killed him, and then killed Sharon because she knew too much—or else this

person wanted her dead for some other reason and used my father's death as a cover."

"Cover for what?"

"For his motive for killing Sharon. Let's say he believes my father was murdered, though in fact it was suicide. So he arranges to kill Sharon in such a way that suspicion falls upon the imagined murderer of my father."

"That's a bit farfetched."

"And, this being so," Graham continued, disregarding Nigel, "we have a killer in the family circle who may decide he'd like to get rid of a few more of us, perhaps so that all my father's money may come to him, not just his own share."

"Why should he start off with Sharon, then? She only inherited indirectly, through Harold," said Clare.

"That could be a blind," Graham replied, with a significant look at her.

"Meaning that Harold himself killed her, just to throw dust in our eyes—"

"He had another motive too."

"—and is now going to pick off the rest of you one by one. Do you seriously believe that?"

Nigel broke in. "You seem still convinced that your father killed himself. How on earth do you explain the disappearance of his body?"

"Obviously, someone moved it."

"But why?"

"Search me Wait a minute, though." Graham's long nose twitched inquisitively. "Suppose someone discovered the diary before I did—while my father was still alive. The bit about Petronius would give this person the idea for murdering him in such a way that it looked like suicide, but then he finds the diary pages gone, which were to be the final proof that it was suicide. No, that won't do; I didn't take them till after the body had disappeared. No It must have been suicide. I've got it!" Graham excitedly snapped his fingers. "My father killed himself One of us found the body, assumed it was murder, and threw the body into the Thames in the hope that, by the time it was recovered, the signs of murder would be obliterated. And I can tell you straightway which of us would be most likely to do that. Brother James. He's a terror for the conventions. Never do for a murdered body to be found in a doctor's house Jolly bad show. How about that?"

Nigel had felt much of this eager ingenuity to be rather preposterous and disagreeably adolescent, but he made a noncommittal reply Then, taking up the charred and crumpled piece of paper, he said, "All this theorizing of yours started with 'Suppose someone else had discovered the diary before I

did.' Well, if we're going to suppose that, the one really important thing that follows is that this person would read about your threats to murder your father, and would have you as the perfect scapegoat if he decided to do the murder himself."

"Yes. That had occurred to me. But I'd have thought he'd have waited longer, to see if I wasn't going to get rid of my father for him. It must have thrown him pretty heavily when he found the diary pages had disappeared."

"Which of you seemed most exercised about hunting for the diary after Dr. Piers' death?"

"I don't know," Graham hesitantly answered. "Becky did most of the chasing round for it. But I remember James kept asking her if she'd come across it yet, and so did Harold." The young man got himself to his feet "Well, it was good of you both to let me stay so long. It's taken a weight off my mind " He held out his hand toward Nigel. "Can I have it back?" he ingenuously asked.

"This bit from the diary? Good lord, no."

"But you've read it now."

"It'll have to go to the handwriting experts We must make certain it's not a forgery."

13. *HOW THE BODY VANISHED*

"I see you're sleeping here now," remarked Nigel, glancing at the camp bed covered with a tartan rug that was ranged against one wall of the study.

"Yes," Dr. James Loudron replied. "I have to be by the telephone at night, and there isn't one in my own room. There's an extension in my father's, of course, but I don't like the idea of—"

"Sleeping there? Naturally. You sleep well?"

"Luckily. But the traffic on this side of the house wakes me up rather early. Why do you ask?"

"You look as if you needed sleep."

And indeed the doctor did. His eyes were heavy, as if it took a painful effort to move them in their sockets, the skin beneath them looked stained and pouchy. His solid shoulders drooped dejectedly. He seemed a man at the end of his tether. A haunted man. Or a bewildered ox.

"Well, I've got a half day at last. The first since . . ." His voice petered out again.

"And it's good of you to let me take up a bit of it. How did you manage?"

"One of my colleagues at the hospital agreed to do locum for a while. He's taken over some of my father's patients."

There was another silence. Dr James seemed too exhausted even to ask Nigel why he was here. Nigel glanced round the study, at the bed, the bookshelves, the telephone, the paneling that Janet had had painted to resemble stripped wood, in a pathetically misguided attempt to please her husband. It was in here that Walt Barn had beaten up the newspaperman, while Rebecca looked on, half appalled, half fascinated. And in here, maybe, Dr. Piers Loudron had written the diary, a fragment of which was now being examined by the handwriting experts.

"That voice you heard on the telephone—"

"Voice? When?" said James dully.

"The bogus call that took you out the night Sharon—"

James visibly flinched. "Oh, for God's sake! Must I go into all that again? I told the Inspector I could not identify it."

"Not even if it was a man or a woman speaking?"

"No . . . But, look here, how could it have been a woman?"

"Why not?"

"But, damn it, wasn't it the—the person who killed Sharon? Ringing up to get me near the place where—"

"And couldn't Sharon's murderer, or an accomplice of the murderer, be a woman?"

Dr. James lowered his head, in the old, dangerous, bull-like way.

"Are you insinuating that Becky—"

"Why Becky?"

"She's the only woman left in our family, isn't she? And that stocking!" The doctor shook his head as if to clear it, then burst out, in the gravelly voice of exhaustion, "Who is it? Who is it that hates us so?"

"Hates you?"

"Using that stocking of Mother's out of Becky's drawer. Hiding my driving gloves. It's absolutely fiendish. You know, if this goes on, I shall become paranoiac."

Nigel eyed him in silence for several moments. The time had come. He had put this off too long, and he knew why The lie would be no more morally respectable because it was necessary in order to clear the way to the truth.

"And now," he said, "I'm afraid you're going to number me amongst the persecutors."

James Loudron gazed at him in a lackluster way.

"Will you not tell me the truth about the night when your father's body vanished?" said Nigel, without inflection.

"What on earth do you mean?" Dr James sounded angry, but as if his will was lashing a tired mind into anger. "I resent that very much. I *have* told the truth—all I know about it—over and over again. I'm sick and tired of the whole business."

"When you came in that night, after delivering the baby, you went to your father's room—perhaps to say good night, perhaps to consult him. You found him dead. In the bath. You wrapped the body in his tweed overcoat, carried it out through the back door, put it on the front passenger's seat of his car, drove to the river, and tipped it in beside the Trafalgar Tavern."

James was staring at him stupidly, as if hypnotized. "You're mad. You must be mad. I went back in the car to my patient's house, because—"

"The woman had no complications," Nigel went on tonelessly. "There was no reason whatsoever to return there so soon after the birth. And there's no other reasonable explanation why you should have taken the car when the fog was so bad that on your first visit you had to walk there."

"But I *have* explained that. I thought the fog had lifted a bit. And who

the devil are you to instruct me about my medical duties?" the doctor added, with another feeble spurt of anger.

"You were seen putting the body in the river. The police have found an eyewitness at last. I shouldn't be telling you this, but—"

James Loudron's whole face and body sagged. In his rumpled suit he looked like a Fifth of November guy "Is that true?" he muttered, glaring sightlessly. "They're going to arrest me, you mean? For the murder?"

"They will certainly bring a charge. What that charge will be depends upon your telling the truth. If you could give me the facts now—"

"I—would you mind if my sister was here?"

After a pause, Nigel said, "Very well."

"She's in the garden, I think. I'll fetch her."

When James had gone out, with a stiff, old man's gait, Nigel had leisure to ruminate on the unpleasing ruse by which he had brought things to a head, and on James' next movements; the garden, after all, led to the garage, and at this very moment James might be making a bolt for it.

In a couple of minutes, however, James returned with Rebecca. Brother and sister sat side by side on the sofa, looking like chastened children, holding hands. James looked up at Nigel.

"You do realize this means the finish of my career?"

Nigel nodded, feeling sickened by himself. His eyes rested on James Loudron's face; its expression had changed, putting into Nigel's mind the lines "If calm at all, if any calm, a calm despair."

"James didn't do it!" exclaimed Rebecca, with a flash of her brown eyes

"I didn't do it But I did quite enough to, well, make the police believe I did. Sorry, that's not very coherent." He lifted his heavy gaze toward Nigel. "I've just told Becky, outside, that it was I who put my father's body in the river."

"But he didn't murder him," said Rebecca fiercely. "James would never kill anyone in a cowardly way like that."

"Tell that to the police, Becky!" said her brother. "Strangeways says they've found an eyewitness—someone who saw me by the Trafalgar Tavern."

Nigel would not meet Rebecca's eyes; but he felt they were scrutinizing him keenly. "You'd better tell us exactly what happened," he said.

Rising, James moved to the window and turned round with his back to it, as if he could not bear the light upon his face. Past his bulky shoulder, Nigel could see the February sunshine palely gilding the stucco of the derelict cinema, once a Victorian music hall, on the opposite side of the road, a pigeon flew out of one of its shattered windows

"When I got back from the confinement, I went to Father's room. I was a bit worried about another patient, and wanted to consult him. You know," James added, with a rueful half smile, "he had more medicine in his little finger than I and a dozen other—"

"*And* he let you know it," Rebecca put in.

"Well, he wasn't there. Something made me go through into the bathroom. His body was there. In the bath. Naked. The arteries had been cut. One of his razors lay in the bath beside him. The water was pink, but I could see it. I made sure he was dead. Then I examined the cuts."

"And you realized at once it was not suicide?"

"Almost at once. I'm a bit rusty on the medicolegal stuff, but there were no preliminary cuts—I knew about the significance of that, of course—and then I examined closer and saw the two incised wounds were of equal depth."

"So you knew it was murder? And the murderer must be one of this household, or somebody who had a key to the house?" Nigel was aware of the tenseness with which Rebecca sat there, her eyes fastened on her brother. "That was why you took the terrible risk of moving the body? You were afraid of the effect it would have on the practice if Dr. Piers was found murdered in his own house?"

"Yes."

"*No!*" Rebecca cried out forcefully "I won't let you make yourself out so mean, so—so mercenary. James was afraid that—"

"Please, Becky!"

"James was protecting me. He thought I'd done it. He'd overheard me telling Father I wished he was dead." The woman spoke in a white heat of exaltation, and went on talking, even more rapidly and incoherently, until James shook her by the shoulders, commanding, "Stop that, Becky! You're getting hysterical. Stop it at once!"

"Well, anyway," said Nigel, when she had calmed down, "whatever your reason was, you moved the body. Tell me exactly what you did. It may be important."

James Loudron had let the bloodstained water run out of the bath. He then wiped all traces of blood from the body, and cleaned the bath so that there should be no telltale rim. He pocketed the razor, fetched his father's Connemara-tweed overcoat from the bedroom, wrapped the body in it, and carried it out to the garage.

"Were the bedroom or bathroom doors locked while you did all this?"

"I'd locked the bathroom door, not the other one"

"You were so sure it was murder, you didn't look for a suicide note?"

"No. I'd no doubt. It's occurred to me since, of course, that the murderer meant it to look like suicide."

"Why the tweed coat? You'd wiped the blood off the body, and there'd be no more bleeding."

"You'll think it rather queer—I'm a doctor, after all, and used to handling cadavers—but I felt there was something indecent about carting him around naked. He was my father."

"You thought that, if you threw him into the Thames, the body would not be found till decomposition had removed the signs pointing to murder?"

"Well I suppose so. Confused them, anyway. But I don't know that I really thought it out so far ahead I—well, I was in a bit of a panic. I just wanted to get rid of the body. And I had what seemed a good excuse for going out again, to a spot just beside the river."

"Supposing it had been low tide?"

"Oh, when you've lived here as long as we have, you know the state of the tides almost by instinct."

"So you got the body to the garage; unobserved, as far as you know"

"It would have been commented on," James sourly rejoined, "if anyone had noticed me walking about with a corpse."

"And then?"

"I took him to the river and dumped him in. I've told you so. Do you want a running commentary on every stage of the process?" For a moment James was stirred out of his flat dejection.

"Yes, I do. It's not idle curiosity You've been bottling it all up too long—what must have been the most horrible experience of your life. It'll do you good to let it out."

"You think I'm heading for a nervous breakdown otherwise? But that'd get me into the prison hospital instead of a cell."

"Oh, *James!*" Rebecca burst into sobs. This time her brother disregarded her, and she soon stifled them.

"Accessory after the fact," he said. "That'll be the charge, won't it?"

Nigel was silent.

"You don't think I'm making all this up to cover the fact that I killed him myself?" James persisted.

"Oh, lord no, you didn't kill him."

Rebecca's head came up sharply, as if someone had jerked it by the heavy coils of hair.

"That overcoat," Nigel went on. "Feeling it was indecent to carry him about naked. A person who killed him in that way wouldn't have that sort

of feeling; and I don't think you've got the sort of imagination to make it up afterward."

Yet the doctor, as he recounted the details of that grisly ride to the river, showed more imagination—or sensibility, at least—than many would have credited him with. While he talked, Nigel glanced from him to Rebecca, sitting dry-eyed now, and from her to the yellowish, derelict cinema on the far side of the street, with its medallions and broken windows and the boards fastened to the façade—"FREEHOLD FOR SALE."

"I managed to get him propped up beside me on the front seat It was like old times, sort of. When I was qualifying, I used to drive him on his rounds during the vacations. The fog was as bad as ever. I had to open the side window to see anything at all. I remember thinking he'd get cold with nothing on but that overcoat. Bloody silly. But he—the body kept lolling up against me, as if for warmth. I got out of Burney Street and into the High Road past St. Alfege's It was driving blind—never knew which side of the road I was on till I hit the curb. Then I damn nearly ran into the traffic island at the end of Nelson Parade. That gave me the cold shudders; suppose I had an accident and was found with a corpse on the front seat. I nearly jumped out and ran away at that point It must have taken me five minutes to reach the Naval College. And then I nearly hit the traffic island beyond the bus stop I had to wrench the wheel to the left, and the body—well, he gave me a sharp nudge in the ribs. I could almost hear him say, 'Keep your mind on your driving'—he was always the back-seat driver, wasn't he, Becky? Well, when we'd missed that island and got round into the Woolwich Road, I picked up a rear light in front of me—bloke crawling even slower than myself—and closed up on him as near as I dared and trailed along behind him I had to keep one eye on him in case I bumped him, and the other on the lookout for the left turn into Park Row. Luckily there's a pedestrian crossing just before the turn, and I was able to pick out the zebra just in time to swing left. When I got down to the river, I had a violent fit of coughing—result of driving with my head out of the window all the way—so I had to shut the window in case anyone heard me I parked as near the river wall as I could get, and dragged Father out. The overcoat nearly came off him. I did up all the buttons and put the razor in the pocket It was dead quiet. The fog. I felt as if I was deaf as well as blind Then I heard the water lapping, and carried him in that direction. I lifted him over the railing and dropped him in. It seemed to make a hell of a noise, after the silence. That's all there is to it. How anyone could have spotted me in that fog, I can't imagine. I remember saying—sort of in my head—just after the splash, 'Father, forgive us our trespasses.' And that's

bloody queer too, since I don't believe any of that stuff; and if I was saying it to my earthly father, then we had a damn sight more trespasses to forgive him than, vice versa, Mother had, anyway."

The monotonous, compulsive voice stopped, making way for a silence as absolute as that which must have closed in after the body of Dr. Piers Loudron had fallen through the fog into the water and the ripples had died away.

"Tell me one thing," said Nigel at last. "*Who* did you think had killed your father?"

James Loudron gazed back at him in stubborn silence.

"I said all along you were trying to protect someone. There's only one of your family you'd go to such lengths to protect."

"Can't you leave me alone now?" said James, in a small voice that sounded as if it came from the bottom of some fathomless pit.

"Yes, why don't you leave him alone?" exclaimed Rebecca, taking her brother's hand.

"Two murders have been done."

"And James thought it was I who killed our father. No, James, of course you did. I hated him for what he'd done to Mother, and the way he treated me—always making me feel inferior—his everlasting snubs. And then when I had a chance of happiness, with Walter, Father had no use for me except as a housekeeper, but he wouldn't let me go. He—"

"Quiet, Becky! You're getting hysterical again."

"Yes. Go on, say it! I'm unbalanced, not responsible for my actions."

"Don't be absurd, Becky. You're as sane as I am."

"Still protecting your poor wretched sister?"

"Oh, for God's sake—"

"Well, *did* you kill him?" asked Nigel, in an equable tone.

Rebecca Loudron turned her blazing eyes upon him. "No. I just wished him dead. Time after time And at last he was dead. Shall we take the will for the deed?"

The old James Loudron, so easily embarrassed by displays of emotion, looked out from the heavy, exhausted face of the man on the sofa. "I think we'd better call it a day. Do you want me to give myself up to the police now? I'd like to make some arrangements with Lightfoot, my locum."

Nigel could not meet his eyes "Just a minute. I've something to tell you."

Before he could say it, Rebecca had pounced upon it with a leap of intuition "You were lying! The police have no eyewitness."

"Becky, please! Strangeways would never—"

"If someone had really seen you throw Father's body into the river, would he wait all this time before telling the police?"

She stared implacably at Nigel, who said, "No. There was no eyewitness."

"And now you've wormed it out of James by a foul trick, you'll trot off to the police and—"

"The police suspect it was your brother who moved the body. They have no evidence. I do not propose to give them any," Nigel flatly replied.

"So you were just playing a cat-and-mouse game for your own private amusement. That makes it more despicable still." Rebecca Loudron was almost beautiful in the flush of her indignation. "What sort of a creature are you?"

"One of your family has murdered twice. He must be stopped, before it becomes a habit. He won't be stopped if the rest of you conceal the truth. Sharon was strangled with a silk stocking out of your drawer. Perhaps she'd concealed something which would have saved her life if she'd come out with it. Perhaps *you* know something which would have saved her "

"How could I?" said Rebecca uncertainly. "What do you mean?"

"Something, for instance, about Walt Barn?"

Her eyes opened wide in consternation. "Walt? But that's absurd! He wasn't there," she cried, her voice going up on the last word.

Nigel stared hard at her. "Say that again," he demanded.

"I said he wasn't there. He left this house soon after eleven I saw him off, saw him pushing his bicycle up the hill. I stood in the door for a minute or two. He didn't come back down the hill. He could never have got to—to where Sharon was killed if he'd gone all the way up the hill and along the south of the Park and down Maze Hill; there wouldn't have been time "

Nigel cut in on her babbling. "Never mind that, Miss Loudron The morning your father disappeared and you and Graham went to look for him —you told me that Graham tried the bathroom."

"Yes," said Rebecca, mystified

"You didn't go in yourself. Right?"

"Yes "

"When he went into the bathroom, Graham called out, 'He's not here.' You remember that?"

"Yes."

"How did he say it?"

"I don't understand you."

"Say the words as he said them. Try to remember the exact intonation," Nigel urgently asked.

Rebecca hesitated, an anxious look on her face—the same look that had so often appeared when her father cracked his intellectual whip at her. "Honestly, I don't think I can, I'm not good as a mimic."

"Well, for instance, did he say it like this"—Nigel spoke the phrase with a fairly level intonation, stressing the last word—"or was it more like this"—his voice went down in pitch on the second word and hit a high note on the last one.

"Yes, that was it," Rebecca exclaimed. "The way you said it the second time."

"Good. You see what that means, particularly when you take it in conjunction with what you told me about Graham's not having seemed at all worried about your father till that moment?"

"Well, he did seem pretty upset when he came out of the bathroom. But—"

"You mean," James put in, "he'd only say 'He's not here' in that surprised sort of way if he'd expected him to *be* there?"

"Precisely."

"And what deduction do we draw from that, my dear brother and sister?" came a voice from the doorway.

Graham Loudron had been listening for an unknown period of time. He now walked in and put himself on the window seat.

"So it *was* you, James, who disposed of the—er—remains? I always suspected it," he coolly remarked.

"Eavesdropping again, you filthy little tick!" James shouted He made to get up from the sofa, but Rebecca restrained him.

"How could you have been so surprised that Father was not in the bathroom," she said, in an almost gloating voice, "if you hadn't seen him there the night before—if you hadn't killed him in the bath yourself?"

"You were always jealous of me, weren't you? Both of you?"

"Keep to the point," said James. "Answer her question. You can't wriggle out of that one, can you?"

Their enmity pulsated in the room like scorching breath from a furnace. The three Loudrons seemed to have forgotten Nigel's presence

"My poor James, there are several answers. Becky couldn't possibly remember how I said it; she's tone-deaf."

"That's ridiculous."

"Well, what's much more likely is that she's pretending I said it in that surprised way so that she can put the blame on me for the murder. You'd like me out of the way, wouldn't you?"

"The police will be interested in that theory," said James.

"Police? I can just see you going to the police with it!" Graham uttered an uncheerful laugh. "If you do, I shall tell them about your disposal of the body. No, it'd better be Strangeways here who plays the role of talebearer. After all, he enjoys it."

"Do you know," Nigel affably remarked, gazing at Graham's head outlined against the window, "do you know that your face is the shape of an isosceles triangle the wrong way up?"

Graham's silhouetted form became rigid.

"So that if I turned you upside down, you'd be resting on your base, so to speak. Bear that in mind. I'd do it, but for the disgusting things that might fall out of your pockets."

The other two stared at Nigel, bemused. Graham, profoundly uneasy, shifted off the window seat and took a chair at the round table. "I suppose all this means something," he said.

"On the contrary, it means nothing at all. That's the beauty of it Are you acquainted with the fruit bat, or flying fox? *Pteropidae,* they're called, if you prefer Latin."

"I simply don't know what you're talking about."

"Come, come. I asked a simple question. Either you are acquainted with the *Pteropidae* or you aren't."

"Well, I'm not, as it happens," Graham sulkily replied

"That's better. Now, let's try another simple question Was your father dying or dead when you found him in the bath?"

"But I didn't find him in the bath," replied Graham, in the elaborately patient manner of one humoring a lunatic. "He wasn't *there.*"

"You see? Even now your voice goes up in that protesting way at the end of the phrase. You're still genuinely indignant that the body wasn't there. Surprised and indignant. It simply wasn't playing the game for the body to have disappeared. But I was talking about the previous night. While Sharon was waiting for you in your room. You'd gone to Dr. Piers' bathroom. Did you find him dying or dead? Surely you can remember? Or were you in such a panic that you didn't try to find out?"

"But I never went to—"

"Be careful. Think of the consequences of denying it. If you'd found him happily singing in the bath, you'd never have been in such a state—'terribly worried,' as Rebecca put it—next morning when you discovered he wasn't there. So, the night before, you found him either dead or dying "

"But I tell you—"

"Or, if you didn't, there's only one alternative—that you killed him yourself."

Nigel threw a forensic glance at James and Rebecca, as if they were members of the jury. Graham merely shrugged; Nigel's attempt to rattle him out of his composure had not quite succeeded

"Either alternative," Nigel continued, "would account for the strange state of excitement Sharon noticed in you when you returned to your room."

"You seem to forget, I have never admitted to being out of my room that night. It was Sharon's story that she waited ten minutes for me there."

"And now Sharon is dead, so she cannot talk about that night any more."

Graham shrugged again.

"You had threatened to kill your father," Nigel began.

"What's that?" exclaimed Dr. James. "How do you know this? Is it true?"

"Graham told me himself."

"But why should *you* want to kill him?" The words came out involuntarily from Rebecca. She flushed "I mean, you were always his favorite."

"He seduced my mother, and then let her bl- bleeding well starve to death," the young man stuttered.

"I simply don't believe you," said James. "Melodramatic bosh."

"Of course, *your* mother was equally responsible."

"How dare you say that!" James shouted. "You take that back, or I'll—"

"Your mother intercepted the letters my mother sent him when she was dying Have you forgotten that quarrel? Becky hasn't."

"Leave my sister out of it, you wretched little twerp!"

"I can't. She's in it Up to the neck. She hated her father as much as I did, and you know it. Laugh that one off. She didn't dare go into the bathroom next morning She pretends it was I who got the shock when the body wasn't there. *And* she put the sleeping draught in his coffee; oh, yes, she did, I saw her You did, didn't you, Becky?"

Rebecca Loudron's eyes glared rigidly at him. Her mouth worked as if she were suffocating, then opened in a long, wailing sound, and she stumbled out of the room.

14. *THE SORROWS OF WALTER*

A few hours later, Nigel and Chief Inspector Wright were discussing the latest developments of the case. Graham Loudron's evidence about the sleeping draught had been unshaken in a tough interview with Wright He had noticed Rebecca putting a white powder into her father's coffee cup after dinner. If he was telling the truth, it must have been a stronger dose than the post-mortem had suggested—or perhaps the old man was already sleepy—for it to have taken effect so soon. Asked why he had concealed this knowledge from the police, Graham replied that he'd been unwilling to do anything to incriminate his sister, until she and her brother set upon him during the interview just now with Nigel.

"That's all my eye, of course," Wright briskly commented. "If you ask me, he was just saving it up to blackmail her with later."

"You've a very low opinion of the young man."

"Haven't you? He's a criminal type, potentially, if not actually We'll nail him yet."

"For the murders? He's your suspect Number 1?"

"He is."

Nigel offered Wright a cigarette and lit it for him The smoke curling across Wright's sallow face gave him a Mephistophelean look

"Well, what does Rebecca Loudron say?"

"She doesn't. Incommunicado. You seem to have driven her into fits. Dr. James put her to bed, gave her a sedative; says she's not in a state to be interviewed yet. I have a man at her bedside."

"But, my dear chap, if Graham's the murderer, how do you account for *her* doping the coffee? You're not suggesting he and Rebecca were in it together?"

"We've only Graham's word for it that she did dope the coffee Do *you* believe him?"

"If his accusation was untrue, she'd have flown into a rage of indignation Her reaction was very, very different."

"Well, damn it, if she did dope the coffee, that meant she and/or Walter Barn murdered the old man. Is that your idea?"

"It doesn't follow. I can think of a perfectly innocent reason for her

administering the sleeping draught. She'd probably tell us now, if only—no, we needn't wait, we can ask Walter."

"I'm afraid we can't."

"*What?*"

"He's disappeared."

"Oh, lord, not another disappearance!"

"He and his bicycle are missing. I went up there this morning. Another occupant of the house saw him go off early on his bike, with a knapsack, and he's not back yet. Nothing sinister about it, probably."

"Talking of him and his bike," Nigel began, and proceeded to tell Wright what Rebecca had said about Walt's departure on the night Sharon was killed.

"So, if she was killed at the time we think she was, Barn could not have got there in time to do it," said Wright slowly. "*If* Miss Loudron is telling the truth Why the devil didn't she mention this before?"

"Possibly because the point seemed of no importance till I suggested that Sharon may have been killed because she knew something about Rebecca and Walt. Possibly those two really are guilty and Rebecca made this story up to strengthen his alibi."

"Dr James' gauntlet gloves," said the Inspector, after a pause. "You know there are scratches on the back of them. Our laboratory chaps have found traces of nail varnish in the scratches, and particles of leather beneath the dead woman's nails They correspond."

"The blessings of science All we need to know is who wore them. Any more enthralling pieces of evidence?"

"Negative only. The D D I. of the manor Tooley Street's in tells me none of his constables on the beat noticed Harold Loudron and his Jaguar the night Mrs. Loudron was killed. Mind you, that doesn't break his alibi. He doesn't remember which side street he parked in to let the alcoholic fumes dissipate. A Jag would stick out like a sore thumb in any of those streets, but there's a hell of a lot of 'em, and the police patrols wouldn't cover them all during the period in question "

"You've eliminated Harold? In your own mind?"

"I've eliminated nobody. That's the hell of this case; it's getting me dizzy. Too many motives, too many clues, and all pointing in every which direction. Even Harold—he could have pinched that silk stocking, he could have taken the gauntlet gloves and hidden them afterward—he was in and out of Number 6 often enough. Dr. James has had the luck of the devil."

"Dr. James?" said Nigel, startled.

"Oh, I don't mean he's the murderer. Though he might be. No, getting the body out of the house and into the river without a soul seeing him."

"Yes, I agree."

"It couldn't have been anyone else who moved the body."

"No."

Nigel was uncomfortably aware of his friend's piercing eyes upon him.

"What were you talking about to Dr. James and his sister this afternoon?" asked the Inspector.

"That very thing."

"He denied it?"

Nigel hesitated. The lie with which he had elicited Dr. James' confession lay heavily on his conscience. To lie to his old friend Wright was unthinkable.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Dr. James is my client. I can't tell you about our conversation."

"You have told me." The steel in Chief Inspector Wright came out, as he said coldly, "Well, I hope you know what you are doing," and abruptly took his departure.

Next morning was sunny At eleven o'clock, when Clare was out shopping, Walt Barn turned up on Nigel's doorstep. It was the first time Nigel had seen the young painter looking thoroughly worried. Walt told him he'd been down at Number 6, but they'd told him Rebecca was ill and not allowed to have any visitors.

"Why wasn't I told before? Is she bad, do you know?"

"You couldn't be found yesterday."

"Oh, lord, she did send for me then?"

"No, the police were looking for you."

"Christ! She's not—nothing's happened to her?"

"Nothing too serious, I hope. I'd better ring the police and reassure them you haven't fled the country."

Walt stood by Nigel in the hall while he rang up and left a message for Inspector Wright.

"Let's go into the Park," said Nigel. "I need some fresh air. Where were you all yesterday?"

"I needed fresh air too Bicycled out through Bromley. Wandered about in those woods—you know, on the right after you've turned off onto the Westerham road Didn't get back till late. What the hell do the coppers want with me now?"

"I've no idea. Checking up again about the night Sharon was killed, maybe."

"I wish they'd get out of my hair. My mum always told me, Walt, she said, don't you have nothing to do with that lot, she said. And she was right!"

They were climbing up the steep grassy slope, Croom's Hill on their right, the Park road to their left. At the top, Nigel led his companion, who was breathing heavily, toward a wooden bench on the knoll. They sat down.

In the clear air, all London seemed to be unrolled like a map below them. At their feet lay the consummate elegance of the Queen's House, flanked by its colonnades, with the twin domes of the Palace towering up beyond it. The river sparkled like a crystal snake, winding its way round the Isle of Dogs, sinuously curving out of sight where it turned eastward again beyond the West India Docks, Millwall, and Poplar Colored funnels of steamers sticking up amongst the thousands of drab chimney pots. The attitudinizing cranes. The huge flour mill dominating the middle distance. And then, away to the left, through the leafless trees, they could see Greenwich reach, a few ships on it tiny as Minitoys, on its way toward the Pool of London; and beyond it the dome of St. Paul's glittered in the morning light, and Westminster Abbey was visible away to the northwest.

"You know," Walt remarked, "I never seen all this before. One hell of a panorama, isn't it?" He gave his companion an odd look. " 'And he took him up onto a high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world'—somehow like that it goes, doesn't it?"

"More or less But I'm not the Devil, and I'm not going to tempt you I didn't know you were religious."

"My mum was. Regular old Bible-basher, when she wasn't on the booze."

Nigel studied his companion for a moment. The cannonball head, the fringe of hair along his brow, the speedwell-blue eyes which flitted so restlessly from object to object, hard to pin down as butterflies; the cheeky, challenging expression of a slum child. Naive though Rebecca Loudron was in ways, she seemed fully adult compared with Walt—this tough, brash young man who could be mischievous as a child, not from any inherent viciousness, maybe, but because he had never lost the child's irresponsibility and his need to make an impression.

"Graham says he saw Rebecca put a sleeping powder in her father's coffee," Nigel quietly remarked.

The blue eyes turned to him and flickered away

"So what?"

"Did she?"

"How should I know? You mean the night he was murdered? I wasn't there—not at dinner, I mean."

"I know that. You were upstairs, in her room. Why do you have to be so evasive about it? Or aren't you interested?"

"The old catechism again."

"Rebecca didn't deny it."

"Well, that's her affair, isn't it?"

"You really are an extraordinary freak. The woman you're supposed to be going to marry is accused of something that, if it's true, could pretty well convict her of murder, and you say you're not interested."

A badgered look came on Walt's face. "Look, there's no 'supposed to be' about it. After you and I had that dust-up, I had a think—it sort of cleared my mind—I went to see Becky and told her I'd go through with it."

" 'Go through with it'?" Nigel chuckled. "That must have made her feel on top of the world."

"Don't be so bloody daft! I didn't put it like that."

"But it was what you meant?"

Again Walter shied away. "Look," he said presently, "there's quite a simple explanation of that powder Becky gave the old man "

"I shouldn't be surprised It was to put him to sleep, wasn't it?" said Nigel, without irony.

"That's right. She'd just had a hell of a barney with him. About us. He'd forbidden her to see me again, or else. Well, Becky sent for me and smuggled me upstairs. We'd come to a crisis—got to decide one way or the other. Defy the old——or break it up between us Last thing Becky wanted was for him to come trotting upstairs and find me there and turf me out before she and I had had a regular old heart-to-heart and thrashed it all out."

"Which you did to the strains of Mozart?"

"Some of the time. Why not?"

"Why not indeed? You really are a bloody silly ape."

"*Now* what have I said?"

"Not telling the police about this at the start "

"Oh, come off it. It'd be a cinch for them; if we'd told them it was Becky who doped the old man, they'd have jumped at the chance of arresting her, and me too, for murdering him."

"I suppose there's no use telling you that people like Inspector Wright don't jump at the chance of arresting anyone and everyone?"

"No use at all. The poor bleeders want promotion, don't they? D'you

really suppose they'd have swallowed a story that Becky put her dad to sleep just so that she and I could have a nice long talk? Phooey!"

"Well, *I'm* prepared to swallow it."

"You're different. You're human. More or less. Your mind doesn't wear a uniform."

Nigel gave Walt a cigarette and lit it. "So now everyone is happy again."

"Don't kid yourself."

"You're still wondering if Rebecca might have killed her father before she came up to you?"

"Oh, it's not that." Walt dismissed it with a wave of his cigarette. "Maybe she did, maybe she didn't. The old man had it coming to him anyway. Phony old domestic tyrant."

"You've got more serious matters on your mind?"

"Sure I have," replied Walt, disregarding Nigel's mild irony, or not noticing it. He gazed in silence at the great distances of London unrolled beneath them. "Funny, us coming up here," he said at last. "Look at all that The Smoke. Millions of houses and factories and shops and warehouses. Own just two or three of those millions and you're sitting pretty. Or are you?"

"Are *you*, you mean?"

"It's a temptation. When you're poor, anyway."

"Yes"

"You say yes, but what do you know about the problems of the artist?"

"Quite a lot. I live with one."

"That's true. But Massinger's made it. She's a success, *and* she's good She doesn't have to think about the right way for her, as an artist, to live; not any more."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"Now you probably think I'm a self-centered young bastard who tries to inflate a little scrap of talent with a lot of flash talk. Well, I daresay I throw my weight around a bit But, believe me, I've no use for the layabouts, the pub-crawlers, all those bearded wonders who think a paintbrush is for signing your name with Me, I'd cut my grandmother's throat if I knew I could paint better by doing it. But I *don't* know. Oh, I can paint as well as the next man. But that's not the point. It's not good enough. What I worry about is whether I have it in me to paint better than the next man, and if I have, what kind of life I should live to give myself the best chance of doing so."

"Clare felt exactly the same when she was your age."

Walt's eye brightened "Did she now? I'd never have believed it" He

relapsed again into his gloomy expression, hands loosely dangling between his knees.

"Which brings us to Becky again," Nigel prompted.

"Yeah. Poor old Becky. And poor old Barn." The words came out differently now, in jerks and rushes "It's not just a matter of her money—will it corrupt me, make me lazy, take the edge off things. Though that's enough of a problem. No. It's more complicated I've a responsibility toward her, and a responsibility toward my work If I let her down now, God knows what she mightn't do. She takes things hard, you know. Abnormally, I'd say I wouldn't want to have her on my conscience. But suppose I go through with it and then find that my work peters out; I'd be blaming it on her, on our marriage, you see? And that would wreck the marriage. Well, suppose I pluck up courage and break it off now, and then find that my work still comes to nothing, that I'd hurt her mortally to no purpose; what sort of a heel d'you suppose I'd feel?"

Nigel looked at him consideringly, then away to a tug towing its string of lighters on the Thames far below. "I think you're putting up a comparatively unreal problem to conceal the real one, which you daren't face."

"O.K., teacher, chalk it up on the blackboard"

"In the first place, you could quite easily dispose of the problem of Rebecca's wealth, if you think that might be bad for your work."

"You mean—"

"Just take enough of the money for you and her to live on very simply. Give the rest away—"

"To my fellow artists? Ha!" Walter laughed. "Corrupt *them?* Eliminate the competitors?"

"—or keep it in the bank for your children, not touch it yourselves. Would Rebecca agree to that?"

"Yes, she probably would. But—"

"But that's not the real problem either."

"Say on, professor."

"The real problem, which you're smoke-screening with these other ones, is simply this. Do you or don't you love her enough to risk everything for her—to gamble your most precious thing, your talent, on your love?"

The young man was silent, pressing his hands together, his round face tightened in a sorrowful perplexity.

"We must look like one of those Victorian problem pictures," he said at last. "The Rustic Bench, or Shall He Emigrate?" He fell silent again, then burst out, "Love her? I don't even know if I believe in love!"

"Oh, bosh! You might as well say you don't know if you believe in

Greenwich Park. You're *in* Greenwich Park—you'd bloody well better believe in it."

"She'd make a good wife," said Walter presently. "She can cook and run a house and all that."

"Is she interested in your work?"

"Well, because it's *my* work. I can imagine her getting a damned sight too ambitious, on my behalf. I don't like being pushed ahead." His eyes flickered at Nigel. "D'you think she's, well, quite normal? I mean, the way she blows her top sometimes, it scares me."

"If she had a safety valve, she wouldn't blow her top."

"Meaning marriage? I wonder. What about Sharon and poor old Harold?"

"What about them?"

"She was married. Devoted husband—worshiped the ground she trod on and all that lark. Didn't stop her bursting into flames whenever a pair of trousers came in sight. If I'd been Harold, I'd have wrung her neck long ago."

"Well, Rebecca isn't Sharon, and Harold isn't exactly like you either. Why drag them in?"

"Your talking about safety valves. The way poor old Harold looked at her with those spaniel eyes—throw me that bone, please, when all the other dogs have had the meat off it—putting up with all her discontentedness and her lousy lovers—I ask you! Either he's not a man at all or he'd screwed down the safety valve so hard that—"

"That he finally blew up and killed her? Well, it's a theory. But why should he kill his father?"

"Does he have to have killed them both?"

"Someone did."

"Well, poor old Harold needed the dough, from all I hear."

"So did you and Rebecca."

Walt Barn's eyes danced audaciously at Nigel. "I'm tired of talking. That hold you got on me the other day—can you teach me it?"

"What, here?"

"Yes."

Nigel shook his head, grinned, demonstrated the hold and then the blow to disarm a man with a knife. Walt was a quick learner

"Let's have a fight," he said presently. "No dirty stuff. See if I can throw you."

During the wrestling match that ensued, Nigel was made aware of Walt's extraordinary competitiveness; the young man clearly took any form of

contest with absurd seriousness. Nigel reflected, as they heaved and panted, how a few sons of the working class overcompensate for the utter noncompetitiveness of the rest.

A parkkeeper came pounding toward them, appalled by the spectacle of a young tough and a middle-aged gentleman locked in mortal combat. As he neared them, they hurled each other to the ground and started rolling down the hill. Blowing his whistle, the parkkeeper followed, to come to a halt open-mouthed when the furious pair rose from the grass, dusted each other off, and proceeded amicably toward the Croom's Hill gate.

"Well, I feel better for all that," said Walter Barn. "But I still don't know what to do about Becky."

"If I were you, I'd wait upon the course of events Let it ride—just a little longer."

15. *OUT OF MOURNING*

"What on earth have you been up to?" asked Clare, when Nigel had seen Walter Barn off on his bicycle.

"Fighting again. Quite friendly this time. Walt was determined to demonstrate his strength. He's a very pertinacious type "

"Perhaps he'll turn out a good painter, then. What did he want, apart from physical combat?"

Nigel told her about the conversation. From this, they drifted on to the subject of Dr. Piers, his family, and the two crimes. Clare listening with the calm attentiveness of a mere on a windless day, he reviewed the motives, the evidence, the crosshatching of lies and evasions with which more than one of the suspects had confused the pattern of the case.

"It all points to one person," Nigel concluded, telling her the name of this person. "I've no doubt in my own mind. I don't think Wright has, either, but he's got to eliminate the others and offer a case that will satisfy the Public Prosecutor. It takes time."

"And in the meanwhile?"

"Exactly. One can't expect this sort of killer to sit back on his laurels."

Clare came over in a swirl of black hair and flung herself against him. "Nigel Darling I wish you'd let this alone. I'm frightened. You must be in danger yourself."

"Yes And I shall probably be in worse danger before we've finished."

"You're not going to—"

"If a scorpion won't come out of its hole—"

"You're too big to get into a scorpion's hole," said Clare, with a shaky laugh.

While they were having lunch, the telephone rang

"It's Harold," said Clare when she had answered it. "He wants to see you. Tonight."

"Ask him to come—no, tell him I'll come round after dinner."

Clare gave him a long, meditative look, then, biting her lip, she returned to the telephone.

"Between 9 30 and 10," Nigel called after her.

At 9:40, Nigel was walking briskly beneath the power station. On the river to his left a dark shape slid downstream, its engines throbbing like a headache. By the light of a street lamp he could see, scrawled in chalk by some youthful misanthrope on the wall of the scrapyard facing him, the legend "I HATE MEN." Males, or just humanity in general, he wondered

Ahead of him lay the narrow passage between corrugated-iron walls where Sharon Loudron had been strangled. The lamps the murderer had broken were repaired now; the passage did not look sinister, only squalid "When the lamp is shattered," he murmured to himself, "the light in the dust lies dead." A burst of singing came from the "Cutty Sark" pub as he emerged from the passage onto Ballast Quay

Nigel paused a moment to watch the port and starboard lights of the throbbing motor vessel swing slowly round as she made her turn northward into the reach. He could see, too, the bowsprit and rounded bows of the wrecked barge projecting toward him from behind the high wall that hid the quay she was moored at and Harold's house.

What with the noises of the river and the pub, it was impossible to be sure, but Nigel could not get rid of a strong impression that he was being followed. There was so much shadow along the waterside here, and in the wind that had strengthened a few hours ago some of the shadows seemed to move, to be blowing to and fro. Moving on, he found the door in the wall unlocked. He went in and rang the bell of Harold Loudron's front door.

Just after Nigel had left his own house, the telephone rang. Clare took up the receiver. A hoarse, muffled voice said, "Could I speak to Mr. Strangeways, please."

"I'm afraid he's just gone out. Who is it?"

"Rebecca Loudron. Is that Clare?"

"But, my dear, oughtn't you to be in bed? You don't sound at all yourself."

"Oh, I'm better, thank you. James told me not to get up, but he's gone out somewhere, so I've crept downstairs."

"Is it something urgent, then? You could get Nigel at Harold's house, if it is; he's gone along there."

"Well, it can probably wait till the morning. I must ring off now. Good night."

Replacing the receiver, Clare stood for a moment in thought Then, throwing on a warm coat and a headscarf, she hurried out of the house

"Hello. Good of you to come." Harold lowered his voice. "Graham's turned up. I don't think he'll be staying long, though."

Graham Loudron's presence was not at all what he had expected, nor, for that matter, as they went into the sitting room, did Nigel expect the transformation he found there. No dust, no disorder, no longer the air of neglect. Sprawling in a hammocklike armchair by the windows that overlooked the river, Graham tipped a hand at him. Nigel sensed a certain undercurrent excitement in the young man, which gave animation—even charm—to his usually inexpressive features. He remembered Rebecca—or was it James?—telling him that in their younger days Harold and Graham had rather paired off together.

"Becky and I have been doing our best to cheer Harold up," said Graham, while their host was outside fetching drinks. "He wouldn't come to stay at Number 6, so we drop in here from time to time."

"Your sister has been cleaning the place up, I see."

"Oh, yes, and cooking an occasional meal for him. Till yesterday, when you drove her into hysterics."

Nigel was prevented by Harold's return from commenting on this remarkable misrepresentation of yesterday's proceedings. As Harold poured out the drinks, after offering them in the hushed tones that he evidently thought suitable to a recently bereaved widower, Nigel studied him with attention. His City pallor had always been so marked that grief could hardly heighten it. Nor was the small, upright figure any less spruce; the temporary seediness and disorientation that overtake most husbands when their wives have died were notably absent from Harold's appearance, which was all the more notable considering how uxorious a husband he had been. If anything showed in him different, it was a withdrawn, almost wary look of the eyes, which had black rings under them.

"I haven't seen you since—" began Nigel, breaking the awkward silence. "I'm most terribly sorry about it all."

"Yes, it was bloody awful If I could lay my hands on the person who killed her—"

Even tragedy could not rob Harold of his clichés.

Nigel plowed on. "I do hope you'll soon be feeling better—a bit better able to cope with things."

"Thank you. I've tried to carry on My work in the City, you know—one has to keep one's finger on the pulse. Work is the only anodyne, though I can't say I'm feeling any beneficial effects from it as yet," Harold concluded, with a deprecatory and stilted little gesture startlingly reminiscent of his father.

Nigel caught a flicker of a smile on Graham's face. It was all the young man had contributed so far.

"Have you any idea how soon the police will have these matters cleared up?" Harold resumed.

"I'm afraid not But they may be cleared up sooner than the police anticipate," said Nigel, his pale-blue eyes resting impassively upon Harold's

"We were talking about Harold's alibi just before you came," said Graham, still exuding that aura of repressed excitement; it gave him, Nigel thought, a positively dangerous charm.

"I'm sure Strangeways doesn't want to—er—to talk shop," put in Harold, looking embarrassed.

"I bet he does."

"Which alibi?" Nigel asked.

"The trunk call he heard but didn't answer the night my father died. Tremendous bit of luck for you, wasn't it, Harold?"

"I don't know why you keep harping on that," replied Harold, with a kind of cautious resentfulness.

"Well, I ask you! Strangeways here has got it into his head that I killed Father and your wife: I've got no convincing alibis for either night, naturally I'm envious of your luck in having one."

"This is all extremely distasteful," said Harold stuffily.

"What did you ask Strangeways here to talk about, then?"

"Private matters."

"I stand rebuked."

Now it was Graham who uncannily reminded Nigel of Dr. Piers—the old man's suave and feline manner. Odd how he had left his stamp, in such different ways, upon his two younger children.

"Of course," continued Graham, "you could have faked that alibi. With your tape recorder."

"The police were perfectly well aware of that. The Inspector played over all my reels of tape, and—"

"All the reels he could find."

"Don't be ridiculous, my dear chap. The police turned this house upside down to see if I'd hidden any. Besides, I should have thought it was obvious, if I *had* faked up an alibi, as you put it, by leaving my tape recorder running in the hall, near the telephone, I'd have—"

"All this is beside the point," Nigel interrupted, in an impatient voice He turned to Graham. "If you want to accuse your brother of the murder, why not come straight out with it?"

"My half brother. I've revealed to Harold the secret of my birth," said Graham sardonically.

"I don't know why you have to pick on me"—Harold's tone was almost sentimentally rueful—"we used to be such friends. When you were a little chap, first came to live with us, you and I were as thick as anything. I used to—"

"You used to love money, even then," Graham harshly broke in. "You encouraged me to pinch cash from Father and James, and gave me a percentage of it. Quite the businessman!"

"Oh, damn it! Look here, we were young then. Why rake up little peccadilloes like—"

"You've always been an expert in passing the buck and avoiding the blame, haven't you?"

Harold's face was whiter than ever under this goading.

"If you're suggesting that—"

"Well, you'd have been ruined if Father hadn't died so opportunely."

"This is absolutely intolerable!" Harold started up from his chair, trembling with anger "And anyway," he lamely added, "it's damned bad form in front of a stranger—a guest of mine."

Graham began shaking with silent laughter. "Poor old Harold! True to type to the bitter end. 'His white collar remained starched when all around him wilted.' *Times* obituary."

"Won't you have another drink?" Harold addressed Nigel, ostentatiously ignoring his brother Nigel watched him carefully as he poured it out It was clear that Harold wished to be alone with Nigel, but Graham showed no signs of taking the hint. The three talked in a desultory way for nearly three quarters of an hour longer before Harold brought himself to say, "Graham, old boy, do trot along now, will you? It's getting late, and I want to have a private word with Strangeways."

"The dear old barge," said Graham, looking left out of the window. "What secrets she could tell! Why do you keep her still? Sentimental reasons?"

"She's going to the breaker's yard next month. Come on, Graham."

As Harold went to the door, Graham, rising from the window seat, gave Nigel a glance of urgent complicity and jerked his head in the direction of the quay. "See you very soon, I hope," he said.

Clare, staring through the window of the "Cutty Sark" bar, whose lights had just been put out to speed the unwillingly parting habitués, saw the figure of Graham Loudron stride briskly past the front of the pub.

"Closing time, please, Miss," said the barman.

Clare went out into the blowy night, tightening her headscarf Nigel was still in Harold's house, presumably; should she go home now? Or go in and pick him up? She took a few steps homeward in her heelless shoes, which made no sound on the cobbles; then, changing her mind, she turned about and walked toward Harold's house, scrutinizing those on the opposite side of the street. One, with a small porch, seemed to be unoccupied. She glided into the porch and, resting her back against the door, prepared to wait.

"Graham really is an extraordinary chap. Sometimes I don't know what to make of him," Harold was saying.

Nigel let this unexceptionable proposition hang in the air for some moments before remarking, "I mustn't stay too long. What did you want to see me about?"

Harold Loudron, who had already been punishing the whisky bottle, poured himself another stiff dose.

"It's an extraordinary thing," he said, slurring his words a little. "I'd have thought Sharon's death would've broken me up altogether But, fact is, sounds a fearfully caddish sort of thing to say, but fact is I've been feeling a new man—what's the word?—re—re—"

"Juvenated," Nigel supplied.

"That's it. Rejuvenated."

"Good for you."

"Whassat? Oh, I see. But you really do feel—don't feel I should be ashamed of feeling rejuvenated? Tell me the truth, old man. I can take it."

"No."

Harold's pale face was sweating profusely. "I don't mind telling you, between you and I, Sharon used to play me up."

"Did she?"

"You're damn right she did. Other men, you know," Harold confidentially muttered. "Keep it under your hat, old chap, don't want it to get around, *de mortuis* and all that, but Sharon was a Grade A bitch. Couldn't help it, poor girl. Oversexed. I've no doubt she picked up some fellow that night, and picked a wrong 'un, and that's how she—er—met her end "

"An interesting theory."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic. Who did murder the poor girl, then?"

"A person with a hopelessly deficient sense of reality," Nigel answered. Harold stared at him blankly for several moments, then resumed.

"What I was leading up to, she *got* them. Any man. She got *me* Don't

mind telling you she had me lashed to the wheel and steering any course she fancied. You may think I was infatuated with her."

"Well—"

"And you'd be damn right. But look at it from my point of view. She was so different from everything that my poor old father—and James and Becky—represented You probably think me a very conventional sort of chap, but it's conventional chaps like me who fall hardest for girls like Sharon, every time. And she was such a marvelous girl to do things with," the widower enthusiastically continued. "Of course, she got bored with things quickly, but as long as they were new she was like a child, she got so excited with them. I know she found me a bit of an old stick-in-the-mud after a while. But she did *rely* on me, in a funny way, and that's why I simply couldn't boot her out or create at all when she started going off the rails. D'you get the idea?"

"Perfectly."

"I believe you do. Sympathetic chap, though I can't say I took to you at the start. Don't hit it off with intellectuals."

"You prefer boats."

"Every time, old man. What was I saying—oh, yes, now I really *loved* my wife, don't let there be any mistake about that. But it was a strain, keeping up with her and keeping down my feelings about—not to mince matters, about her affairs and so on and so forth. But this is the point, Strangeways: it was not till after her death that I realized what a strain it had been." Harold stared, sapiently as an owl, at his companion.

"Because the strain was no longer there?"

"Absolutely. You've put it in a nutshell. I woke up a morning or two ago, after the first shock had passed, and I suddenly felt as if a tremendous weight had been lifted off me, and I was free I felt re—re—"

"Juvenated?"

"Don't be silly, old man. Never heard of it. I felt resilient. On top of the world Sailing free. And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by."

Harold rambled on in this vein for a good while longer. At last Nigel managed to bring him to the point.

"Why did I ask you to come round? Let me think now Oh, yes. How soon can I clear out of here?"

"Clear out?"

Harold explained, in a manner rather less prolix than his previous outpourings, that he had had an offer to join a party of three or four friends who proposed to sail a thirty-foot yawl round the world.

"They want to start in April or May, and I'd like to go with them The

police simply won't commit themselves to—trouble with them is they spend so much time asking me questions they've no breath left to answer one."

Nigel pointed out that, even if an arrest were made tomorrow, the legal proceedings might well drag on for several months.

"Legal proceedings?" asked Harold. "But why should I be involved in them?"

"You'd certainly be called to give evidence."

"But I know nothing about my father's death."

"There's the matter of your wife's murder," said Nigel, gazing noncommittally at the pale, anxious face of Harold Loudron, who seemed to have talked himself into comparative sobriety.

"I'm hardly likely to forget that, old man," replied Harold, with a huffy attempt at dignity.

"You were going to chuck up your business altogether?"

"Why not? Actually the chap I was dining with the night poor Sharon was killed, he's quite keen to take it over. Anyway, I don't need to make money now; I shall be getting my share of Father's estate. Of course, I've had to borrow on it to recoup certain financial losses I'd sustained. But there'll be plenty left over for me to live on, now that Sharon—" he broke off, looking rather shamefaced, then firmly continued. "She did run through money, you know; sometimes she behaved as if I was made of it But I couldn't refuse her anything."

"Anyway, you see yourself embarking on a new life?"

"I want to get away from everything—the City, Greenwich, this house. Its memories are too painful for me." Harold Loudron's moment of truth had passed, he was evidently about to launch forth on a maudlin and meaningless lament for the *temps perdu.* Nigel cut him short with, "Have you tried retracing the route you took from the restaurant that night? If you did it in the dark, you might be able to remember which turn you took off Tooley Street. Then the police could narrow down their inquiries"

"I suppose I might try that," said Harold gloomily. "But I doubt if anyone would have noticed me there I seem to remember it was mostly warehouses."

"Well, that'd be a help."

"Oh, what does it matter, anyway?" Harold cried. "I shall never get it off my mind that if I hadn't been tight that night, I'd have been home in time to— Sharon would never have gone out."

"Well, it's time for me to be getting home too. Just on eleven I really must be off."

16. *ON THE MUD*

Nigel heard Harold lock the outer door behind him. He turned right and started walking homeward. The wind had risen: waves were slamming against the river wall, and a creaking and thudding could be heard from where Harold's barge was moored. As he came out opposite the "Cutty Sark's" darkened windows, he saw a figure sitting on the parapet above the river, in the angle made by the wall between Ballast Quay and Harold's house. There was a low whistle. Nigel stepped over the chain and went up to the solitary figure Once again, he got a strong impression that he was being watched or followed.

"Thought you were never coming," said Graham Loudron.

"What do *you* want?"

"Ssh! Keep your voice down." Graham jerked his finger at the wall. "Don't want him to hear us."

"Look, it's damned late. Have you been hanging about here ever since?"

"More or less. I tipped you the wink inside. Didn't you get it?"

"Yes, but I can't understand—"

Graham's eyes glittered with excitement in the light of the street lamp at the end of the quay "I found it. This afternoon. Hidden on the 'Sharon.' That reel of tape the police were looking for—at least, it must be that one. Come along, I'll show you."

Graham stepped off the parapet, over the gunwale of the "Sharon," onto her deck. After a few seconds' hesitation, Nigel followed him. They picked their way past the capstan, over several coils of rope and a tarpaulin, to the mainmast. It was dark enough here already, and at this moment the light went out in the windows of the room where Nigel and Harold had been sitting. The barge stirred uneasily at the onset of the waves that jostled her against the quayside; her moorings creaked, overhead the halyards were slapping and a block squeaked.

"Watch out here. Part of the decking's gone." Graham led the way along the starboard side of the vessel, hugging the bulwark and skirting a strip of darkness, four foot broad, which ran from the foot of the mast to the raised afterdeck of the barge. As he passed the end of this strip, Nigel looked down. He could just descry a jagged edge of planking, and below it, in the

barge's hold, a sluggishly stirring, faintly gleaming mass. Mud, he thought; it must be the mud that has gradually seeped in.

Graham, bent double, entered the main hatch Nigel followed him down the ladder into a pit of darkness that proved to be the barge's main cabin Graham's electric torch lighted up for a few moments the mildewed pitch pine of the walls, a tattered old calendar still hanging from one of them, and at the forward end the jagged planking Nigel had seen from above.

"That bit of floor's gone," said Graham, extinguishing his torch. "Keep away from that end, or you'll fall into the bilge Harold had a number of planks removed from here and the deck—they were rotten—but he never got round to replacing them Are you armed?"

"Armed? Good lord, no. Why?"

"Well, I should think we could tackle Harold all right between us."

"But why should we have to tackle Harold?"

"You're very slow tonight. Didn't you hear me hinting about the tape and the barge? I thought I might get him rattled enough to give himself away. Like you tried to do with me yesterday. I wouldn't put it past him to guess that you and I'd go after the tape when we left."

"Oh, I see." In the blackness, Nigel could feel rather than see the excited young man's eyes probing in his direction. Graham went on to describe how he had given much thought to the question of the missing tape that constituted Harold's alibi for the night of Dr. Piers' murder. He remembered at last a loose panel, with a shallow cavity behind it, which Harold had once shown him in this very cabin.

"He's nailed it up, of course, after putting the tape in there. But I found it, all right, this afternoon."

"You've chosen a very dramatic way of revealing his secret," said Nigel equably.

"Oh, well, if you're not interested—" Graham's voice was positively pettish.

"But I am, I am. I suppose you did it this way so that you could crow over the police and myself. It's certainly one up to you. And it's very odd that the police didn't find this hiding place." Nigel added

"They never thought of looking for the tape here."

"And you did?" Now that Nigel's eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, he could see the shape of Graham Loudron sitting on the floor, his back against the bulkhead, hands in pockets There was a loud thump, and the barge faintly shuddered.

"I say," Nigel whispered. "Could that be Harold jumping onto the deck?"

"Don't be nervous. It's only the rudder. It's a very heavy one, and the wheel's broken loose from its lashings, so the rudder bashes up against the quay wall when you get a steamer's wash coming in."

"Why do you suppose Harold hid the tape?"

"Well, isn't that obvious? If it was found, he'd have no alibi."

"But why *hide* it? Why not burn it—those tapes are highly inflammable—or just run the recorder backward and scrub it?"

"God knows why not. I'm no expert on Harold's mentality. All I can say is, there's a tape in there behind the panel. Look for yourself, if you don't believe me."

"Oh, I've no doubt there is. *Now.*"

"What d'you mean, 'now'?"

"Well," Nigel calmly told him, "the police examined this barge from stem to stern some days ago. They found no tape. But let's see it, anyway."

"See for yourself." Graham shone the torch beam at the loose panel. Nigel moved over, withdrew the panel, and took out the reel of tape, which stood on end behind it.

"What did I tell you?" said Graham triumphantly.

"Oh, I didn't doubt there'd be a reel there. A reel you'd faked up, with a telephone bell ringing." Weighing the reel in his hand, he made a gesture as if to toss it into the bilge, then put it in his overcoat pocket. "You really are the most transparently foolish murderer I've ever come across."

Clare, at her post in the porch of the empty house, had seen Graham reappear from her right about five minutes after he had walked away He must have gone down Lassell Street, cut across to Pelton Road, and returned to the waterside that way. She froze to immobility in the porch, which fortunately was in shadow from the street lamp, as he passed. He strolled, without any apparent attempt at concealment, onto Ballast Quay, where he moved out of the range of her vision, the sound of his footsteps ceased. He was evidently waiting for somebody, and that somebody could only be Nigel.

Some twenty minutes later, the outer door of Harold Loudron's house opened. Two voices said good night, and Nigel emerged. So unfurtive had Graham's movements been that, though she knew he was a double murderer—or at least Nigel believed him to be—she could not for a moment entertain the idea that Graham would try anything on, here, tonight. Then Clare remembered how Sharon had been strangled, at this time of night, in the dark passage only fifty yards from where she stood. She hurried silently after Nigel and was about to call out a warning to him when she heard his

voice in amicable conversation with Graham. She paused for a moment in her tracks, the wind whipping her headscarf; Nigel surely knows what he is doing; I must let him play it his way, and not interfere

Peering cautiously round the wall, she saw Nigel's back as he stepped from the quay into the bows of the wrecked barge. She stood, undecided Knock at the "Cutty Sark" and tell them Nigel was closeted with a murderer on the derelict opposite their windows? Walk home, leaving Nigel to carry out, uninterrupted, whatever his mysterious plan was? Find a telephone and ring the police? After only the briefest hesitation, Clare moved to the river wall and soundlessly stepped onto the barge.

"And you're the stupidest, most amateur amateur detective," was Graham's schoolboyish retort. "Not even to come armed!"

"How do you know I'm not?"

Graham's torch flashed on, its beam holding Nigel steadily "It doesn't much matter whether you are or not. I have a revolver, and I shall shoot if I see your hands going to your pockets." Graham allowed the torchlight to fall for an instant on the revolver he held in his other hand. "Move back to the edge of the floor. Now sit down. Of course, I intend to shoot you anyway, but I like the idea of making you sweat a bit first."

The torch beam struck against Nigel's eyes, and he closed them.

"Saying your prayers?" Graham jeered.

"What on earth will you get out of shooting me?" asked Nigel irritably.

"Pleasure."

"A revolver shot would certainly be heard—"

"I doubt it. Listen."

The old barge's tackle creaked and groaned, slapped and rattled in the gusty wind, every now and then the heavy rudder thumped hard enough to shiver its timbers. Booming sounds came from the hollow lighters off Lovell's Wharf as they pounded together.

"And even if it wasn't heard, you'd never get away long with a third murder."

Graham's toneless voice had an edge of excitement in it. "Don't you be so sure When I shoot you, I shall tip your body over the edge there, just behind where you're sitting. You'll fall into the mud, which is quite deep—I've sounded it—and gradually suffocate, because I shan't shoot to kill you stone-dead. Your body will sink into the mud and disappear. It might never even be found."

"What a nasty little mind you have, my poor boy "

"Don't you dare patronize me!" Graham's voice came out in a sudden

spirit of venom. "It's you who's got to crawl to me. I'll have you groveling before long."

"All right then. You've shot me and disposed of my body Harold will give evidence you did not leave his house very long before I did. Other people must have spotted you hanging about here; you can't expect the luck you had when you strangled Sharon. What've you arranged for an alibi? No, I'll tell *you.* I bet you've made some childishly silly plan by which your brothers and sister will all come under suspicion, as you tried to do over Sharon's murder."

"Not so silly. You've underrated me from the start. That's the mistake that has brought you here tonight."

"I haven't underrated you at all. I saw, almost from the start, you were a particularly dangerous type—an incurable psychopath. In fact, I told Harold only just now that the murderer was a person with a hopelessly deficient sense of reality."

"Cut out the jargon," said Graham, in his stony voice. "I've enough sense of reality to get rid of you."

His eyes closed against the torch beam that mercilessly played upon them, Nigel became aware of the smells in the derelict barge—a smell of mud, a smell of the grain she had once carried and with which she was impregnated, a smell of pervasive rottenness from cankered timbers. Or it might have been the smell of Graham Loudron.

The young man was now boasting about his scheme. "Harold told me you were coming along here tonight I arrived at his house first I rang up from the hall, where he couldn't hear me—"

"Rang up whom?"

"Who do you think? Your mistress, or housekeeper, or whatever you call her."

"Clare Massinger?"

"Yes. Your ____ ____ ____ Clare Massinger." The vile words, enunciated in that dead, toneless voice, appalled Nigel.

"I pretended it was Rebecca speaking—it took Clare in completely—and found out you had left your house I said James had gone out somewhere. When the police start to look for you tomorrow, they'll have all the same old suspects again: Harold—you were last heard of at his house; James out again, perhaps visiting a patient, perhaps not, Becky, who'd got out of bed to telephone your house, and had heard where you'd gone, and might have lain in wait for you along here; and, of course, myself. I never make the mistake of giving myself too definite an alibi "

"The mistake you make, my boy, is talking too much. While you've been

chattering away about your cleverness, at least one person has come onto the deck and is listening—just up above my head there"

It almost worked. Graham's eyes switched upward; the torch beam wavered, but not long enough to allow Nigel to gather himself from his sitting position and make a leap.

"That was a feeble piece of bluff," Graham complacently remarked.

Clare had pulled her head back just in time to avoid the torch beam. She knew herself to be in a desperate quandary. If she called out for help, Graham would shoot Nigel at once. If she went for help, Nigel might well be killed before she returned with it. Besides, what could anyone do? Graham, at the side of the cabin, was protected by the decking above his head, it was Nigel, his face a white disk in the torchlight, who sat beneath the gaping hole where the deck timbers had been removed. The only way to get at Graham would be to shoot down at him diagonally from the forward end of that long rent in the deck, but Clare had nothing to shoot with. If Graham could only be enticed out from under the shelter of the decking, perhaps she could drop something on his head. Stealthily she crawled over the barge, groping for some heavy object. She encountered plenty of heavy objects, but they were all firmly fastened to the deck. There was the afterhatch; could she make her way down that and forward again into the main cabin without Graham's hearing her? No, not a hope; she did not even know that there was a way through, and she had no torch to find it if there was one.

Clare's mind went numb now. She slid face-down onto the deck, weeping hopelessly. After a timeless pause of blank despair, she became aware that her right hand was touching a coil of rope Carrying it, she crept back to the edge of the long rift in the deck. They were still talking. Thank God for that! Clare's cold fingers began to uncoil the rope.

Nigel was talking, not because he thought there was the least hope of rescue from his predicament but out of the mere animal instinct to prolong his life. To follow Graham, unarmed, into the barge had been a risk, of course, but he had gambled on its leading to a showdown; he'd won that bet, and it shouldn't have been so risky a bet for himself; Wright had assured him there was a tail on Graham Loudron. Graham must have shaken off this tail, or maybe some dumb plain-clothes operative was standing about on the quay waiting for Graham and Nigel to reappear from the stinking bowels of the barge.

"You killed Sharon," said Nigel, "not because she knew something which

would give you away but because she'd *told* us this something. It was sheer vindictiveness on your part, you vicious little monster"

"Talk on. You amuse me."

"She'd told me that she waited ten minutes in your room before you appeared, and that when you did you were 'madly above yourself,' in a state of strange excitement—just as you were tonight in Harold's house. You get a kick out of killing, don't you?"

"Mouth beginning to feel a bit dry yet?"

"And the next morning you gave yourself away, irrevocably, by your surprise and consternation when you found the body was not there in the bath. Well, it's lucky for your mother she didn't live to see what a blood-thirsty little maniac you've grown up into."

The torch beam shook. Nigel could imagine the expression on Graham's face.

"Leave my mother out of it, you____ ____!"

"Very well. We'll turn to your father. You'd found his diary You kept that piece of it for insurance—it looked good as a confession of suicide—and showed it to me when you felt I was uncomfortably close on your heels. It was quite a bold stroke on your part."

"Thank you. May I have that in writing?"

"You'd been waiting for an opportunity to kill your father in such a way that it'd be taken for suicide. Also, you wanted to keep him in suspense for as long as possible—make him sweat it out."

"Like I'm doing to you now."

"Your chance came when you noticed Rebecca put a sleeping powder into his coffee that night. Would you care to carry on from there?"

"Oh, it was too easy I went up and found him in bed, asleep I ran a bath, took off his pajamas—I was wearing gloves, of course: burned them in the incinerator afterward—then I slit his wrists That sort of woke him up. He recognized me, all right," Graham added, with an atrocious satisfaction, "before he croaked."

"You'd always wanted to do it that way, hadn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Make him bleed to death Like your mother, who died of hemorrhages. 'Poetic justice' always appeals to the undeveloped, infantile mentality Why, only yesterday you said to Rebecca, 'He seduced my mother, and then let her bl- bleeding well starve to death.' You never stutter. You just stopped yourself saying, 'let her bleed to death.' You can't get that out of your head. I wouldn't be surprised if this same penny-dreadful idea, quite as

much as the notion of inculpating Rebecca, was what made you use her mother's stocking."

"I'd like to have killed her too—their mother."

"Well, you could dig her body up and spit on it. That'd be fun, wouldn't it, little boy?"

There was a hissing breath from Graham. Then he said, "You're trying to make me lose my temper, so that I come and hit you, and you grab my gun. Don't be puerile. You still don't know what you've been up against. I've outwitted you at every turn, and you might as well admit it."

How odd, thought Nigel, that in my last minutes on earth, I should be aware how the damp from these floorboards I'm sitting on is seeping through my coat, and feel quite resentful about it!

"You imagine yourself the cunning, heroic avenger," he said, conscious that an absurdly inappropriate lecturing tone was coming into his voice. "That's another typical delusion, like the delusion that you're going to get away with these murders."

"Perhaps I'm not. But, you see, I don't care," replied the young man, with dreadful, unmistakable sincerity. "That's why I'm so dangerous and why I've had all the luck so far—because I just didn't *care* what happened to me, once I'd made my father bleed to death."

"I asked you once if you hadn't got any ambition. You said you'd like to be a first-rate jazz pianist, but your face gave you away; you'd already achieved your ambition. Nevertheless, don't flatter yourself that you killed him to avenge your mother That's a nice, convenient delusion. Makes you feel big, doesn't it, the idea of being a ruthless revenger?"

"Where will it hurt most to get the bullet?"

"The fact is, you're rotten with resentment. You smell of it. You kid yourself you did it as retribution for what your mother suffered. But you can't even be honest about that. You were getting your own back for what happened to you as a boy after she died; you couldn't take it, even then. Lots of boys have gone through as bad or worse and not turned into futile little self-pitying thugs. No, you're just out for yourself. You killed your father because of that, and because you wanted to get your hands on your share of his money—"

"That's a lie!" Graham almost screamed.

"—to bolster up your pitiful ego. You'd have cut your own mother's throat if it had suited your book."

The silence that followed was more than the cessation of speech; it seemed to eat its way outward like a pool of acid from the now just visible figure of Graham, corroding and corrupting the dank cabin against whose

wall he stood. Nigel could talk no longer. He felt exhausted, exasperated, horribly soiled, too, rather than frightened The barge creaked as another gust of wind struck it; overhead, a halyard chattered.

"I could break your nose with a bullet," said Graham at last, in an almost erotic murmur. "Or plug you in the pit of the stomach." The torch beam moved down. "Or smash your kneecap." The beam focused on Nigel's knees. "Go down on your knees."

"What?"

"I said I'd make you grovel to me. If you go down on your knees and beg me for mercy, I'll shoot you in the head Otherwise, I'll put the bullet where it'll take you much longer to die."

"Judging by the way your hand is shaking, I doubt if you could hit anything but the cabin wall."

"Go on. Grovel."

Nigel began to get up from the floor. Now he was on hands and knees, and just about to flex his legs into a sprinter's starting position and hurl himself at Graham, who had come away from the side of the cabin and was standing only a few feet away. The floor felt slimy under Nigel's hands His muscles were cramped, they hadn't the spring to launch him at his enemy. The thought flashed across his mind that in three seconds he would be paying for the trick he had played on James Loudron

Clare had made a running knot and noose with one end of the rope. She had taken a turn round a stanchion with the slack Now, crouching at the side of the gap in the deck, she waited. She prayed for Graham to come out from beneath the shelter of the decking at the side of the cabin. She heard his threats, and saw the torch beam moving from Nigel's face, to his stomach, to his knees. And then, at last, Graham himself moved He was standing almost directly beneath her.

With the gesture of one throwing a hoop in a fairground booth, Clare tossed the noose, which spread out and fell over Graham's head. The sound of its falling, the flash of it before his eyes, balked Graham's aim and at the same time startled him into pulling the trigger The bullet flew higher than he had intended, and to the right. But, the instant before, Nigel had straightened up to make his desperate spring, so the bullet hit him in the left shoulder.

Clare saw its impact send him staggering backward, to fall from the edge of the broken floor into the hold. She hauled at the slack of the rope, made it fast, then jumped down through the gaping deck into the cabin. The noose had tightened round Graham's neck, and Clare's convulsive haul on

the rope had lifted him off his feet. He dropped torch and revolver, to scrabble at the choking noose. He was stretching his toes, trying to reach the floor, a dangling, dancing puppet.

Sobbing, Clare groped about for the torch on the slimy floor. At last she found it. Mercifully, the bulb had not been broken by the fall She ran to the edge of the flooring. The torch beam showed Nigel's body, face down in the mud; he was slowly sinking into it, and without a struggle. Clare jumped down. The mud, glistening like chocolate blancmange, received her; she managed to get to her feet, but the mud was still up to her thighs, and when she tried for a purchase on Nigel's shoulders, her feet slid on the slippery bottom of the barge.

After a violent effort, holding the torch between her teeth, Clare turned Nigel's body over so that his face, thick with mud, was exposed. Tearing off her headscarf, she began to clear out the mud that plugged his nostrils She did not know whether he was alive or dead—only that she must free him somehow from the viscous, porridgelike stuff that coated him all over. She was talking to him, or his corpse, in a loving, urgent murmur. "Wake up, darling," she heard herself saying. "It's Clare. You're all right. Wake up! *Please.*"

The clogged eyelids fluttered. The eyes opened. "Put out that bloody torch, you bastard," Nigel mumbled.

"Oh, thank God! It's me, love." She pulled him upright against her body, but his legs had no strength in them, and it was almost impossible to prevent him buckling and collapsing into the mud again.

"I can't hold you up much longer," Clare despairingly said.

"Good old Clare." Nigel sighed comfortably, as if he was about to go to sleep. She gave him a violent share.

"Ouch, that hurts, blast you, darling!"

At any rate, it woke Nigel up.

"Where did it hit you?"

"Shoulder," he said, wincing. "What do we do now?"

Clare shone her torch along the hold. As far as its light reached, it showed nothing but a level expanse of mud. The floor through which Clare had jumped was just within reach of her fingers; she could drag herself up into the cabin and run for help, but while she was getting it Nigel would sink down again into the ooze. And he was far too heavy for her to haul up, alone, with a rope. The deadly chill of the mud clasping her legs and thighs began to seep into her heart. Nigel opened his eyes a bit wider.

"Why not yell for help?" he inquired.

The extraordinary thing, Clare realized, was that in the stress and horror of the last few minutes, she simply had not thought of that.

She yelled, time and again, at the top of her voice, feeling her cries snatched away by the gusty wind, drowned by the rattle of halyards and the stunning thumps of the unlashed rudder, or never even penetrating out of this mausoleum of mud and rotting timbers. They were heard, however, at last, by Harold Loudron, who came running out of a door of his house, which gave direct onto the quay. All but spent, Clare heard him shout, and then the noise of feet running along the deck. Nigel's voice was raised to the rescuer now in a croak. "Look out! He's got a revolver!"

"It's all right, darling," said Clare. "He won't use it."

"Graham? He certainly will—unless he's escaped."

Lightheaded with relief, Clare almost giggled. "Don't fuss so. He can't escape."

"What on earth d'you mean?"

"I—he's—well, you see, I hanged him."

17. *DR. PIERS' DIARY*

Graham knows. Everything. What he hadn't guessed, I told him. He came into the study a couple of nights ago and said, "You're my real father, aren't you?" I admitted it. I asked him how he had found out. It seems he's been talking to some woman in Poplar or Millwall (what was he doing there, anyway?) who was a friend of Millie. That started him putting two and two together, for he'd somehow found out about those letters Millie wrote to me.

He accused me of murdering her. I told him this was nonsense. He proceeded to give me, in his cold way, a very highly colored account of his mother's last days. I did not let him see that every word was like a knife twisting in a wound. If only he had *felt* the horror of what he was relating, I should have broken down and implored him for forgiveness. But he was telling it all as a person tells a friend some malicious thing that has been said about the latter—with intent to discomfort, to note and enjoy the discomfiture. So my pride forbade me to indulge his curiosity and malice by breaking down under them.

Forbade me also to take refuge behind Janet. Poor upright, possessive Janet; it is she who was the real villain of the piece, intercepting and hiding those letters Millie wrote me at the last. I could never forgive her for it.

And I was all the more implacable to Janet—I can confess it now—because I had an intuition, when the letters with my money orders for Millie began to be returned through the post with "Not known at this address" scrawled upon them, that Millie would be writing to me direct. Yes, I had a faint suspicion that Janet was hiding something from me; her behavior to me had changed, she never could dissemble. And for a while I let it pass, covertly relieved that I need not open up again the whole wretched, glorious affair of Millie.

But I said nothing of this to Graham. It would have been squalid beyond all words to use Janet's conduct as an excuse or palliative for my own

Perhaps I should have denied at the start that I am Graham's father? I wish I *could* deny it. I hardly dare contemplate the sort of person I must be to have produced the person Graham is; Millie was a heart of gold; all Graham's dreadful traits must be inherited from me.

I was prepared to love him for Millie's sake, to show him every indul-

gence; but what a strain he has put on my good intentions. He'd only been here a few months when he started pilfering in the home. And then that shocking business for which he was sacked from his school; that should have opened my eyes to his real nature, but I still refused to believe that a child of Millie's could be irredeemably bad. I put it down to the hell he'd been through after she died.

Well, yes, and I have liked him too—for his independence, his intransigence, the momentary gleams of charm that remind me of Millie, above all for his quick wits, his brains. James and Becky are worthy characters, no doubt, but they *bore* me; Harold I find an almost meaningless nonentity. Graham at least has never bored me.

Now that my hours, as they say, are numbered (for I do not make the mistake of not taking Graham seriously), I begin to see my life as a sort of inferior Greek tragedy, full of ifs and if-nots and heavy ironies. The *hamartia,* the fatal flaw in myself that caused me to seduce Millie—from this, everything has flowed. If I had not done so, Graham would not have been born, and Millie might still be alive. If Graham had not been born, there would have been no letters for Janet to intercept. If Janet had not then discovered about Millie, the last year of our marriage would not have been such as to erase all our previous life together and to alienate James and Becky from me; they have never forgiven me for their mother's death. And if Janet had not died when she did, I doubt if Becky would have taken up with that mountebank Barn, or Harold married a nymphomaniac; fundamentally, these were gestures made against me, gestures of would-be emancipation.

Yes, but wasn't my affair with Millie such a gesture? The last wild fling of a family man, a middle-aged doctor, against the cramping restrictions of home and profession?

No, it was not only that. It was more than an "affair", I see it now, I knew it then, as the first time in my life I had acted purely on impulse, wholeheartedly, without calculation or self-regard. From the moment Millie came into my surgery, in the late autumn of 1939, I was possessed by her; I did not care what happened to me, my reputation, my family, so long as I had her love The risks we took! They make my blood run cold now, but, like a soldier who does not care whether or no he is killed, I bore a charmed life. We were never found out.

Ah, a charmed life indeed. That young girl from the slums—what a flower she was! What passion and grace and sweet responsiveness! What a devotion behind it! No, I am not romanticizing her. That incredible summer, picking her up at our secret rendezvous, driving out to our pub in

Kent, when the baby had started and I knew the blitzes would soon begin—a time of irresponsibility for me, of the desperate, utter happiness that one wrings out to the last drop only because one knows how transient it must be.

Since then, I have never lived, never really lived, only stayed alive.

And when I told her she must go out of London, for the baby's sake and her own, before the blitzes began, oh, the heart-rending docility and the absolute faith in me that she showed then! Some tears, but not a word of reproach. Not a hint (how many women could have resisted it?) that perhaps I was getting tired of her or using her own welfare as an excuse for ending something that endangered my career.

So she went away; and then she went on the streets and got ill and died —anything rather than be an encumbrance to me. Oh, God! There should be a God to reward her. And I tried to forget her, playing the little hero amongst the bombs and the conflagrations. I just wanted to be dead. A charmed life again, though. Only twenty years ago.

What would my other children think if they knew all this? Would they revise their opinions about the cynical, worldly old martinet they take their father to be? Probably not. Their imaginations are incapable of stretching beyond the point of seeing it as the squalid, clandestine infatuation of a man at the dangerous age for an enticing young bitch.

If Graham could convince me that he has a heart—not like his mother's, that would be too much to ask—but one capable of an infatuation for something outside himself, I would not mind so much. If he could be possessed by something, as I was possessed by her, and risk everything for it —something positive, not this cold and vicious obsession with getting his own back—then there might be hope for him, and if he killed me, I should not have died in vain. But this feeling for his mother he has worked up—I just don't believe in it. He's out for Number 1 every time; it's himself, not Millie, that makes him vindictive.

Of course, I've been blind. I've distorted my vision by trying to see Millie in him, re-create her through him. Otherwise, I'd have recognized the psychopath years ago. Too late now.

Lounging in that chair, his legs over the arm of it, watching me writhe in my very soul when he told me all about his mother's last days—how he enjoyed it, the young brute! And then the threats—not open, but devious, allusive, the torturer's cat-and-mouse game. Not blackmail, I'll give him that. No suggestion of your money or your reputation I found the melodrama palling on me pretty quickly, and asked him point-blank, "Is your intention to murder me, then?" He pursed his little mouth in that calculat-

ing, savoring way, and replied, "You don't deserve to live, do you? You can't *want* to live, after what I've told you. Well, I don't think you have much longer to live—Father." Then he smiled at me and went out.

What am I to do? Too tired to write more now, let alone see my way straight. I'll write some more tomorrow perhaps. If I am alive tomorrow . . .

So there it is He intends to kill me. And I must let him kill me. I've slept on it, and that is my conclusion. I owe it to him—or, rather, to her.

I hope, when the time comes (tonight? tomorrow? next week?), I shall have the resolution not to resist; life-and-death scuffles are so ignominious. But shall I? Interesting Mind over matter; and in my experience matter wins every time.

It all depends how, I daresay. Poison? Enough lethal drugs in the dispensary to put down half my patients. No doubt he'd like to *see* me expire; justice must be seen to be done—an eye for an eye. But since he does not know that I intend to go like a lamb to the slaughter, he'd be afraid of my denouncing him *in extremis*.

What then? Bullet, knife, strangling, gas, blunt instrument, a strong push into the river? There are so many possibilities I must be on my guard not to guard against.

Knowing him, I know it will be something cold and cunning. Yes, and *apt*, the punishment fitting the crime; the emotionally retarded, immaturable sort of mind works in that sort of adolescent symbolism Crude. The poetry of the primitive, the poetic justice of the child.

Oh, my child, our child.

Should I appeal to him? Not to his heart—he has none now, where I am concerned—but to his self-interest? It would be total humiliation; but worse, a humiliation in vain, for he is implacable. It's not merely what he said It's how he said it, how he looked. I am not the best diagnostician in S E London for nothing, I have always known mortal illness when I saw it —a man's death first lifting up its little worm's head within him; and now I know the look of a man set upon another's death—the look that only his victim sees, and that so many victims fail to recognize.

Self-interest! He has only one self-interest. A monomania. To destroy me Let him.

> Thou shalt not be killed, but needs't not strive
> Officiously to stay alive

Yes, that's all very amusing and intrepid. But the morality of it? Do I consider it a good thing, in the interests of justice—personal justice as between him and me—to let him become, through my own passivity, a murderer? Ought I not to protect him from himself by protecting myself from him? A nice point in ethics.

If one believed in the soul, in eternal damnation, there would be no problem. But I do not.

If I loved him, love might tell me the right answer. But evidently I do not; it's what he represents for me—there's the bond, the beautiful, ingrown, paralyzing bond.

Anyway, how the devil should I protect myself against him? I can't wear armor all day and have every meal analyzed before I eat it.

How Janet would have reveled in this situation, with her Wee Free sense of sin and retribution! Cast thy haggis upon the waters, and so on. No, I should not be mocking at poor Janet; after all, I'm half Scottish myself. And she did her best, brought me all that money and gave me children and made an excellent housekeeper.

Let me face it; there's an ineradicable streak of cheapness in me. Men at the point of death shouldn't indulge their levity I wonder what they'll do with the money when I'm dead James will save it, Harold squander it, Becky will marry that worthless little buffoon; and Graham?—how would he use it? They should each get thirty thousand pounds after death duties are paid, and that's not counting my life-insurance policies—another eight thousand pounds to split up among them. Unless . . .

Good God, yes, that's it! Forestall him. If I died before he could kill me —why didn't that occur to me?—it would solve the whole problem. Justice would be done without making him a murderer. The high old Roman way out of difficulties. Fall on one's sword—only I haven't got a sword, and if I had I'm so light I should probably bounce off the point. Petronius, then. The hedonist's method. Euthanasia. Yes, that's the answer.

But don't think of it in terms of expiation. It is simply to save him—I mean to pacify her shade Expiation is a meaningless concept socially, however necessary it may be for the individual's peace of mind

Nothing, *nothing* can redress what happened to Millie. The squalor, the hemorrhages, the appeals I never answered. Her despair, her death, for me they blot out forty years of good work. Crowds will flock to my funeral. They'll eulogize the good physician. They'll not know I was dead years before they put me in the ground.

Tired, tired Can't write much more. Wonder what Strangeways and Miss Massinger made of it all at dinner last night. I must do it soon. But

I'm too tired to kill myself tonight I suspect it may need more resolution than I'd thought.

Millie, Millie. First seen sitting on that wooden bench in a row of patients. Heart-shaped face. Slender, golden—a daffodil, common and unique The sweetness. The trust, the absolute trust. Betrayed. An old man's quavering, mawkish sentimentality How Graham would jeer at it!

Nevertheless, Millie my only love, those brief months of ours were the one time when, outside my work, I have lived fully, positively, with all of myself, because I was totally involved in you. If that was an illusion, it's worth a lifetime of sanity.

But I sent you away—from the best, least selfish of motives—but it meant slowly waking up—no, slowly returning into the sleep of habit, convention, self-regard. So I dwindled back to "normal," shrank back again within the limits of what life had made me and people expected of me.

It was your nature, my love, to accept and to forgive. If you were alive, I would not even have to ask your forgiveness. But you are dead, and myself I cannot forgive. . . .

(continued from front flap)

two sisters—one, a frumpy old maid schoolteacher, the other, the merry widow incarnate—are the catalysts for one of the most puzzling murders Nigel has ever confronted.

The Worm of Death. Dr. Piers Loudron, Nigel and Clare's new neighbor in the Thames River community of Greenwich, has suddenly disappeared. His family asks Nigel to find out what happened to him, but they are far from cooperative about answering any questions. Then the doctor turns up—afloat in the Thames, his wrists neatly cut. Too neatly. Was it suicide—or murder? "Vividly done . . . [with] a startling finish."—*San Francisco Chronicle.*

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